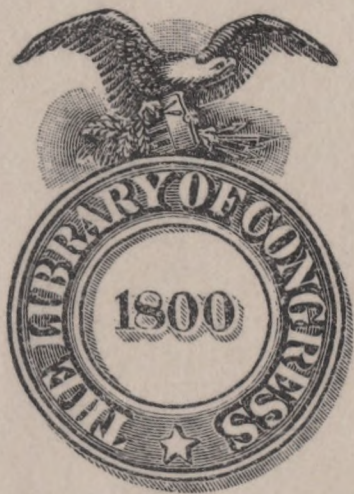


BILLY STANDS THE TEST



Sarah Pratt Carr



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**BILLY TO-MORROW
STANDS THE TEST**

By the Same Author

BILLY TO-MORROW

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“Oh, Billy, it ’s no use!” Erminie sobbed, as the boat grew smaller and smaller on the gray water

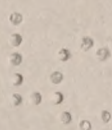
"BILLY TO-MORROW" SERIES

BILLY TO-MORROW STANDS THE TEST

BY
SARAH PRATT CARR

AUTHOR OF
"THE IRON WAY," "BILLY TO-MORROW," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY H. S. DELAY



CHICAGO
A. C. McCLURG & CO.

1911

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To Katherine

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BILLY TO-MORROW STANDS THE TEST

CHAPTER I

EXCITEMENT IN THE FIFTH AVENUE HIGH

IT was a gray afternoon, late in April and cold enough for March, when Billy Bennett, going out of the building to the school grounds, detected a new note in the usual hubbub. There were a hundred or more boys gathered in one corner and listening to some one who was speaking.

Feeling in the school was intense. For the first time in its history there was an attempt to unite the student body under one head, thus depriving the class presidents of some of their power. The project was led by some of the best spirits, in the hope of gaining a better

name for the school, and many of the teachers were, without precedent, taking a quiet part.

As Billy neared, he could hear above other angry voices the raucous, high-pitched tones of the *cultus** Kid, otherwise Jim Barney. He was a stickler for the "Jim." "Just plain Jim; no handles to my name," he would say if offered the courtesy of "Mr. Barney." He had been for years the bully of his class, and now he aspired to be the boss of the school. He was entreating and menacing by turns, a master of the baser sort of eloquence.

"You cheap skates! Call yourselves men, do you? There's not one of you with enough backbone to bolster a twine string! Why, you chew gum because you dass'n't touch tobacco; and one soda pop 'll make the whole bunch of you dippy!"

"Oh, cut it out!" mildly objected one of his own crowd.

"Yes. And trot out your grouch, whatever it is," another demanded.

"It's *our* grouch! I put it up to you," the

**Cultus* is a Chinook word, signifying of little worth, bad.

speaker shouted above the noise. "Has a bunch of teachers, or even the principal or superintendent, a right to meddle with us, to say who we shall have for presidents of our classes or of the whole student body, if this thing of having a school president goes?"

"Yes! Yes!" "They have!" "They ought to!" came from different quarters.

"I'd like to know why," the Kid blustered.

"When students of this school, your own candidate even, follows girls and women on stilts—" "Sis" Jones began.

"Girls on stilts!" jeered some loud voice from the crowd, and the speaker laughed and nodded.

But Reginald Steele's clear tones rose above the clamor. "You know what Jones means, Jim Barney. Last week your man, Buckman, and two of his fellows followed some ladies and girls for nearly a block, using language that is a disgrace to any school."

"Rot! I suppose you think girls ought to run this high school. And that's what they'll do if Hec Price gets elected." He glared around on them, and let his eyes rest on Reginald an instant before continuing. "I put it up to you fellows,

what sort of a president will that grandmother prig make, that's in with the girls and molly-coddles, in with the teachers, in with everybody that's for style, and against a square deal for all. What sort of a fellow is Hec Price for president?"

"A good one!" Billy called cheerily, coming forward from the rear of the crowd, where he had been listening.

Billy was good to look at these days. His freckles were gone; and his skin, free from the blemish that mars so many growing boys, was girlishly fair. His cheeks had the red of full health, and his form was well knit and firm from plenty of work in the "gym"; and although the dimple, much to his disgust still adorned his chin, it had broadened and squared to match his strong shoulders.

Since entering school he had been allied with those opposing "the Kid's crowd," yet he had been able through sheer good-nature to avoid a clash with the bully. But lately that had seemed inevitable, though Billy himself could not understand why.

The speaker sighted Billy and challenged him.

“You, Billy To-morrow, or Yesterday, or Billy Next Week, whatever you call yourself, what have you got to say about the teachers butting into student affairs?” He looked around over the boys, an angry gleam in his red-rimmed eyes. He was stocky, red of hair and skin, red of hose and tie, blustering, blowsy, yet powerful. The strong, uncontrolled passions of generations of ancestors culminated in him in conscious power, plus a tenacity and stratagem that were his own. His silent presence in the room would attract any eye. A reader of men was likely to turn away with regret, as when one sees a mighty stream capable of producing wealth and happiness for mankind, instead tearing through the smiling valley, leaving destruction in its way.

He continued. “Have we, or have we not, a right to run our student business ourselves? to elect our officers, whether class president or school president, without interference? Answer me that. Are we all sissies, to let the girls butt in, to let the high-brows whip us into knuckling to the teachers like kindergarten kids? You, Bill Bennett, what do you say to that?”

"What's the matter with the Kid?" asked Charley Harper, called "Redtop" because of his hair. "I thought he rather liked Billy."

"Don't you know? Billy's copped his girl." Sis Jones winked knowingly.

"Gee! Not the Fish?"

"Yep. Kid wouldn't have cared if it had been Sally or Belle, they're both dead gone on him; but Fishie's different."

"So that's—"

"Go on, Billy! Answer him!" cried several of Jim's opponents.

Billy stepped in front of the crowd, which shifted restlessly, and waited a moment looking them over, trying to arrange his thoughts so that they might carry weight. He had no liking for the fight his mates were forcing on him. He knew the Kid's "line-up" was against the best of the school, including the girls; knew that his methods were, to say the least, unpleasant, and important enough to cause anxiety to the Principal.

Yet Billy was no shirk. He could think on foot better than most of the students; and when his enthusiasm was aroused no one better loved a "scrap" of wits.

He began slowly: "There are several questions we must each put up squarely to ourselves before we can rightly answer Mr. Barney. First, what's a school for?"

"Come off!" growled Jim. "Stick to—"

"Shut up, you!" shouted Redtop, who had grown in size and muscle till he was a force Jim respected. "Billy didn't interrupt you. Be game!"

The Kid subsided. He prided himself on allowing fair play to all.

"Second, why do we hire superintendents and principals, to say nothing of teachers, if they are to have no authority over us that we should respect? And—"

"We don't hire 'em; our fathers do," objected one of Jim's admirers.

"That brings me to my third question: Who pays for the schools?" Billy stopped an instant to think out his argument, and the pause was more effective than he knew. Some of the boys were considering a phase of the school question not often presented to them.

"Nobody's talking about the cost of schools; it's us—ourselves we're talking about. We want—"

Redtop promptly "chucked" the turbulent one.

Billy went on. "At least we don't pay for them, nor hire the teachers. But they are responsible to those who do hire them for the good name of the schools. If students are lazy or lawless the teachers are called to account."

"Well, what's the matter with us? Aren't we all right?" Jim loomed formidably in front of Billy.

"No! We're not all right, Jim Barney. If you and your crowd, and the sort of manners toward women and girls you stand for,—if that's to be the standard for this school, I'm ashamed of it, and ashamed of any principal that will stand for it,—when he knows it." Billy's eyes flashed and he shook his hand at Jim.

"You'll be the tell-tale, I suppose." Barney lunged forward and reached his long arm for Billy's leg; but half a dozen hands pulled him back; and more hisses than he had believed possible warned him that he was on the wrong tack.

"It's because each year Jim Barney has put in his man for class president, and each year his class has made a worse name for itself; and now

he wants to boss the whole school and run his man for the new office,—it's because of this condition that the teachers think it time to interfere." Billy leaned forward and looked fearlessly into the face of the Kid. "If you've any remarks coming, you can make them later to me personally."

"Gee!" Redtop whispered to Sis Jones; "I wish Hec Price was here to see that! Billy's called the Kid's bluff."

"As to the last proposition," Billy continued, "who does pay for the schools? Do we kids put up the money or the brains or the anxiety, or—the any other things it takes to put through a system? Did we build this great institution of the city schools? It is mighty easy to knock it, but I don't see any school kids offering anything better. Do you? I think as long as the State,—but it's the fathers and mothers really,—as long as they hand us a chance to get an education it's up to us to accept it decently or—" he glared at Jim defiantly; "or quit!"

A burst of noisy applause warned Barney that his leadership was imperilled. He looked angrily around and was about to speak, when

Billy, with a power new to his mates and startling to the bully, launched a threat that electrified them all. "Kid Barney, your man for president is a rowdy, and you know it. We are going to expose him and defeat him."

"Not on your life, you won't!" Barney hurled back with a wicked gesture; and his followers broke out noisily.

But Billy's voice rose above the din, the more impressive for dominating it. "We're going to have a man in this new office that represents the whole school,—a man that's honest and capable, and a gentleman besides."

"A kid-glove sneak—"

"And if by any chance your man gets in, Jim Barney, all of us who stand for the decent thing will cut the student body as an organization."

This threat met an instant's silence. It was Billy's own idea, born that moment; but when its great import filtered through those surprised brains, a storm broke that neither Billy nor Jim could master.

"Rats! What good would that do?" Jim at last made himself heard.

"It will be blazoned in every paper in the

State," Billy replied quickly. "The names of the students that follow your man will be published, as well as the names of those standing with the teachers for decency. And you'll find, Jim Barney, when it comes to a show-down, there won't be many fathers and mothers patting you on the back, even among those who don't wear kid gloves."

A roar drowned Billy, but at last they saw that he had more to say and subsided into an expectant hush.

"I propose we form a Good Citizens' Club under Mr. Streeter's system, ask the girls to join, and help the Playground Progressives carry their campaign for a clean playground, no improper language, and a larger respect for the teachers and law."

"Well, I'll be lead-dog to a blind man if that isn't a little the rawest dose yet!" Even that bit of choice English did not relieve the Kid, for he stared silently around at the boys, evidently trying to grasp the situation.

"We got fool clubs enough, except for fun. I'm in for that any time, but not for more work," an overgrown, bulgy-looking boy yawned.

"*More* work?" jeered Sis Jones; "did you ever do any work, Lazyleg?"

"Cut it! School's rotten anyway," the yawner returned; "a kid don't need it like the old folks let on."

"Any slob that goes to school after he's out of the grades, if he don't have to, is dippy," drawled another.

Mumps stepped forward and faced them. Someway, when Sydney Bremmer, the ex-news-boy,—called "Mumps" from his heavy jaw,—when he said anything, people always listened in spite of his style of speech.

"I lay you're mistaken, you wise kids. Thirty years ago a kid could get along in the world without much schooling; but now, if a man expects to do more than dig some other man's ditches, he's got to kick in for things he can't learn in any grammar school. The chap that don't know enough to go to school to-day is the one that's dippy."

"Hooray for Mumps!" Redtop bellowed with a grin of contempt at the bulgy one. Then to Billy, "What's your scheme, anyway?"

"It's Mr. Streeter's idea, a corking good one.

He'll come up and tell us about it if we ask him."

"We'll do it!" shouted several at once.

"No! We don't want any swells running things here," Jim struck in; but even his partial ear heard fresh warning in the conflicting cries. Some suspicion of a force beneath the surface that was growing in strength angered him, but he did not reckon it at its full strength, and he displayed an ill temper that he would better have controlled. "And say, any kid that kicks in on this frame-up has to cut my crowd from this on." He started off, but at the edge of the crowd turned and called, "Come on, kids!"

There was a breathless moment. The dullest one there knew that this was a crisis, knew that the smouldering rebellion against Jim Barney's tyranny had at last broken into open war

None understood the situation better than Billy. "Fellows, think before you follow Jim Barney. His game is as *cultus* as his name; and this hour starts the open fight between rowdyism and decency. All that want to line up for things we shall not be ashamed of, stay!"

For a second no one stirred.

"Come on!" Jim shouted, paused a second, then waved his hand toward Billy. "Or stand in with lily-necked Bill and his Fish!"

With this parting gibe that set Billy's face blazing, he wheeled and walked off the grounds with no backward glance.

Slowly, one by one at first, then in groups as their courage rose, about thirty boys followed him off. Down on the street they sent back one or two loud shouts, and were soon out of hearing.

"This is better than I thought it would be," Billy said to those remaining; "but Jim Barney can divide the school a good deal nearer even than some of you think. How many here are in for an active fight for the good name of the Fifth Avenue High?"

Nearly every one shouted "I!"

"How many like the idea of a Good Citizens' Club?"

Again the vote was largely in favor.

"How many will stand for the girls joining?"

Groans and objections warned him he was on thin ice.

"Well, they can have their clubs separately,

then, as they do in the playground campaign. How many favor a preliminary talk from Mr. Streeter?"

This carried.

"All right. I'll put it up to the Principal, set a day, and post it on the bulletin board."

"All the committee for the Price campaign meet at his house to-night," Redtop yelled.

In the midst of the noise that followed, Mumps went up and slipped his arm into Billy's higher one. "Billy, you're up against a tough job, and I've got some pointers for you. Any time for me?"

"Sure! Come up to dinner, can you?"

"All right."

The two walked off together.

CHAPTER II

BILLY PUTS HIMSELF ON RECORD

NO student of the Fifth Avenue High was more a credit to it than Sydney Bremmer. A motherless boy wholly orphaned by the great fire in San Francisco, he had lived, tramp-like, as a newsboy, till adventuring into the newer opportunities of the City of Green Hills. He had been Billy's fellow-traveller on the steamer that brought them both from California; and his efforts to make good at each turn of his fortune's wheel enlisted every one in his favor.

It was Mr. Streeter who, after watching the boy at Camp Going Some the summer before, advised the lad as to night-school work, helped him with his studies, and at length found a good home for him with a woman who lived alone and wished a boy for errands. Here Sydney went, studied early and late, and passed the examinations admitting him to the high school at the beginning of the winter semester. He was

a general favorite with his class, and on account of his friendship with Billy and Hector, was well known to the juniors.

As the two boys walked along in the gray evening, an unusual silence fell between them, caused on Billy's part by a rush of plans for the coming campaign. But Sydney was occupied with Billy's personal affairs, and puzzled to know how to say certain things he feared Billy would resent.

"Lost your buzzer?" At last Billy waked to the fact that they had walked many blocks without speaking.

"No; but you won't like my buzz."

"Try it and see. You've a right to say what you please to me, Mumps. Hand it over."

"It's about Miss Fisher."

Billy turned and slapped him on the shoulder. "Good for you! I'm sick of hearing her called 'the Fish.' It's a positive disgrace, that nickname."

Sydney's reply was halting, as if he were feeling his way. "Did you ever reckon it might be partly her own fault?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, they call Miss Carter 'the Queen'; does that make you sick?"

"That's different. I began that myself. We always called her that in California,—the Queen of Sheba. But Fish—" He made a gesture of disgust.

"Yet, if the boys called Miss Carter 'the Cart' would you feel the same about it?"

"Search me. I don't get you."

"It's this way: Miss Carter is the style of girl that makes any name you give her—well, kind of fine and all right. But with Miss Fisher—"

"Well?"

"It's up to the girl herself. She's been in the school nearly four years. She's two years older than you, and—"

"Two years is nothing," Billy growled. He was sensitive on that point.

"It's a lot, Billy. She's twice as old as you are in knowing things,—some of 'em it would be a whole lot better if she did n't know. And others she knows—well, she knows 'em just because she's a girl; and you—you're only a kid, Billy; not as old as I am in some ways."

Billy stopped and wheeled. "Say! You're down on her too. Every one has a black eye for her, it seems." He walked on, his face averted.

"No, I'm not; but I don't want to see her get you in trouble, Billy; and that's what she will, without meaning it, too; because the Kid's hankering that way, and mighty mad at you."

"Oh!" With a rush Billy understood some things that had before been enigmatic. "She never cared for Jim," he said presently.

"Maybe not, but she made him think so. See?"

"I see that we have no business to be talking over any girl in this way." Billy spoke coldly, and Sydney felt it.

"Billy Bennett, you know I ain't the kind to harm any girl kid. I wouldn't talk this over with any living kid but you. But you're the best friend I got—except Mr. Streeter—and I'm not going to see you—her too—get stung if I can help it. My advice is, go slow there; and you'll be sorry if you don't take it."

They had arrived at the Wright home, where Billy's sister and brother-in-law, Hal, as well as

Mrs. Bennett, always had a warm welcome for Sydney.

There was no time for further confidential speech, for as soon as the new baby, Billy's nephew, had been duly exhibited, dinner was served; and afterwards both boys had appointments.

Billy went out of his way to accompany Sydney, who was to attend a meeting of his troop down town, the Chetwoots (black bears), the newsboys' troop of the Boy Scouts. Billy did not wish it known that he was to call on Erminie Fisher, especially after their conversation concerning her.

Ever since a day in early winter when she had caught her foot in a car track and fallen, and Billy that moment passing, had helped her up and back to her home, his calls had grown more and more frequent.

Conditions in his own home made these calls doubly pleasant. The advent of his small nephew had robbed him largely of both his mother and his freedom, for he was rather a noisy boy around the house, and the youngster resented noise. And in place of his mother's

good-night talks, now rare, Billy found a lurking substitute in the flattering chatter of the attractive young woman at 745 East Street.

Erminie was beautiful and subtle; beautiful, because she could not help being so; subtle, partly by nature and partly because all her life, by means of wheedling and cajolery, she had adroitly managed—or evaded—her coarse, drinking, but clever father. There were times, however, when no art prevailed against his tyranny. Still she was not bad, but rather the victim of her parentage and environment. She was brilliant, generous, energetic; and when aroused to its need, sincere and faithful.

Her mother was not wise. Her hopes for Erminie were all matrimonial; and her oftenest repeated advice was, “Keep your eye peeled for the chap in the automobile, Sis. It’s money that makes the woman go; and your face is your fortune only when you’re young.”

Into this girl’s sordid life came Billy, clean, young, with high ambitions. Little he dreamed that Erminie’s foot, purposely stuck between the tracks, was as well able as the other to bear her weight during that limping walk home; and not

for any bribe would she have confessed; for if the acquaintance began merely as an escapade, it had grown into a friendship which she cherished as the most beautiful thing in her life.

She was looking for him this evening and saw him when he entered the block. Before he could ring she was at the door. "Let's walk in the park," she said breathily, closing the door behind her. "Dad — dad and ma are quarrelling, and I can't bear you to hear them." She sighed and walked on rapidly, leaving Billy with no alternative but to follow.

He noticed a tone of weariness he had never heard before, for she was the embodiment of high spirits. Also he thought it strange that she should not even greet him. "Is it—is it anything you could tell me about?"

"I ought not, Billy, but I'm going to — I can't keep it to myself any longer." She looked up at him, and he saw both anger and defiance in her dark, restless eyes. "My father wants me to quit school and marry an old fellow — a man nearly forty, who's got the goods — money — and is crazy about me."

Billy gasped. "Gee!" For a minute he

could say no more, and they stood looking at each other till a passer jostled them into moving on.

“But you don’t have to! Girls aren’t like — they aren’t property any more.”

“No; but some fathers think they are.”

“Does your father?”

“Dad wouldn’t put it that way; but you see, Billy, this man who — who wants to marry me — is awfully strong with the city ring, and in some way he has dad cinched. Dad thinks he could make it square by getting him into the family.” Her little half-smile was quite without conceit.

Billy looked at her a moment before replying. Any one seeing her then could have forgiven her a little vanity. The low sun, piercing the clouds for a good-night glance, brought out the rusty reds in her softly waving dark hair, hair that at the roots melted into her creamy skin through a lighter shading that was neither red nor brown, but seemed to have been mixed on Nature’s palette for no other face than hers. Her eyes, usually too shallow and brightly brown, were now deep and misty with an emotion Billy could only guess; while all the loveliness of her gracious

face and figure was enhanced by a womanly dignity new to Billy, new to herself, and unrealized.

"I guess 'most any man 'd like to get into your family that way." All the man in him had risen to her beauty; but he was not thinking of himself—not seeing himself in that relation to her. His remark was entirely impersonal.

She smiled, but instantly it changed to a look of pain. She had no measure but that of personality—herself. "Billy! Don't! Don't! That's the sort of thing they all say, and they don't mean it. I've—I've liked you awfully just because you never handed out that stuff. If I can't trust you, there's—there's nobody." There was a little catch in her voice, and she hastened on.

Billy was astonished, puzzled. In their early acquaintance he had felt and resented her coquetry, and very soon interested her in other ways; had established the same sort of comradeship that existed in his earlier boy and girl friendships; but as their acquaintance progressed he found it rich with new experiences.

This girl was no frank child, but a woman, full-grown, delightfully attractive in her won-

derful knowledge of things he had not even considered; and alluring in her teasing, half tender, half patronizing manner toward him.

Billy's own feeling was as perplexing to him. His mother had warned him against the usual "puppy love," so frank, so ludicrous, that, did not most fathers and mothers have a blushing yet happy remembrance of first-love affairs, they would promptly lock up the younger culprits till the spell wore off.

But Billy's case was different. Erminie, pre-eminently the beauty of the school, knew well how to steer an affair safely and in propriety, as when she chose she knew how to make a fellow look "the silliest sort," in this last art making her largest success with the Kid.

In the park they chose a seat slightly back from the main paths that they might talk freely. Billy had intended to heed Sydney's warning so far as not to be seen out with Erminie for a few weeks. He knew that turbulent days were coming, and if Jim really cared for her, Billy had no desire to inflame him unnecessarily.

Yet here and now that very thing happened. They were barely seated when he passed them,

halted a second, lifted his hat, but was not recognized by Erminie, and passed on with a scowl that Billy understood.

"How was it you didn't bow to him?"

"I never will, after what he said about you. I heard what happened this afternoon."

Billy was uneasy. "It doesn't matter about me, but he'll get back at you some way. I wish you'd speak to him next time, square it with him."

"No, I won't. He can't speak falsely of my best—of my friends and expect to keep in with me."

"But—"

"Billy, *don't* waste time on him. I'm up against the worst ever, and I want your advice."

"My advice!" He laughed. Yet what boy is not flattered by such a request from a lovely girl older than himself? "Are you banking on my wisdom? Yours is much greater."

"Not for what I wish to know, Billy. Tell me about Mr. Alvin Short."

He faced her quickly. "Alvin Short! I don't *know* anything exactly, except that his reputation is as bad as a man's can be. I get it from my brother Hal."

"A grafter?"

"Yes, and worse."

"Worse?"

"Yes. For one thing, he grafts within the law; but those he cinches get it—" Billy lifted an eloquent finger to his neck.

"I was afraid so. That's where he's got dad, I'm afraid."

"Gee! Then he's—" Billy paused, a great disgust for the man rising, but to be routed by a hot sympathy for the girl. "By gracious! You won't have anything to do with him, will you?"

"No." She looked at him earnestly for a moment. "No," she said again with a hint of fatality in her voice; "but that means that I must run away from home."

"Run—away—from home?"

"Yes." She was touched to wistfulness by the thought of what his home must be if no such possible contingent had occurred in his life. "If I don't, I'll have to marry Alvin Short; daddy will make me."

"How can he?"

"Oh, Billy, don't ask me. Fathers have ways. If Cousin Will were here he could help me."

"You never told me about him. Did I ever see him?"

"No. He's not a cousin really. Uncle Henry's wife was married before, and Will is her son. We were great chums till they moved to Oregon a few years ago."

Billy looked at her, speculating on the reminiscent light that came into her eyes as she gazed absently off into the west.

"Will was as good as a brother,—better,—he didn't tease. If he was here he'd not let them make me marry if I didn't want to."

"You are n't old enough to marry!" Billy burst out vehemently.

She smiled faintly. "I'm more than two years older than ma was, and she thinks it would be fine because Alvin—Mr. Short—has so much money."

"Still she won't—surely she won't—" He hesitated, unable to picture a mother who would sacrifice her daughter to such a man. He had seldom seen the tired, frowzy woman who kept out of sight when Erminie had callers.

"Ma always does as dad says. It's the easiest way to keep peace in the family. Sometimes

she spunks up a little, as to-day. Daddy's generally good to her, though; to me, too, if I do as he wants. But lately he won't stand for anything from us."

"What can you do for a living?"

She sighed and drew in her lip. "Nothing well, Billy; but I can learn housework, I suppose."

"Don't you know that already?" He thought of his capable mother, of his sister, who was a good housekeeper as well as an accomplished musician.

"No. Ma has always made me save my hands and complexion, study, take music, go to dancing school, and all that, because she was sure I'd marry rich."

Billy thought hard. Wild notions of succoring this girl, of taking her to his own home, of leaving school and going to work that he might support her, of doing *something*, anything worthy of a man on whom womanhood calls for help. A dozen equally impossible plans surged through his excited brain; but he could not think of anything definite, practical enough.

"Don't look so hurt—so angry, Billy. Some-

thing will turn up. You've told me what I wanted to be sure about, the sort of man Alvin Short is, and —"

"Perhaps some of it isn't true. I'll find out exactly."

"Enough is true to decide me. The man I marry must have a good name, if he hasn't a dollar."

"You won't think about run—about any change right away?"

"No. I guess I can coax dad off—and Mr. Short—till school closes. I want my diploma."

"Couldn't you teach?"

"No, Billy, I'm not built that way; but I can scrub if necessary; and I will, before I'll marry Alvin Short."

Billy looked at her pretty hands, remembering what melodies they had drawn from the piano on the many evenings he and Erminie had sung together; and his anger rose again.

"We must go back. If dad knows I've been out with any one but Mr. Short, he'll be mad."

"But I'm just a boy."

The bitterness in his tone did not escape her. "Don't fret. You're plenty big enough and old

enough to make dad mad, and Alvin Short jealous."

She rose and looked into his face as he stood beside her, head and shoulders taller. She could no more help saying and looking the pleasant, flattering thing to those she cared for than she could help breathing. It was part of her charm. She was always looking more than she meant, too, and having to use all her art to escape the results.

Billy gazed down on her with tender eyes, his heart beating faster with a manly, protecting feeling new to him. "Anyway I'm big enough and old enough to do just my level best to make things easy for you. Let me know how I can, won't you?"

"Yes, Billy, I will. Oh, you're such a comfort!" And because she was worn out by a stormy interview with her father that she was too proud to repeat, she could not restrain the sob that came with the last word.

That was too much for impressionable Billy. He put his arms around her and kissed her.

Often in fun and frolic he had kissed girls more to tease them than to please himself; but

this was very different,—his first man's kiss; and with its sweetness mingled a quick-born sense of responsibility and the acceptance of a man's part. He had put himself on record with her; the kiss was the compact.

They walked for blocks in silence, and separated at the end of her street with but a word of good-bye; speech seemed superfluous.

That night Billy went to bed having a secret his mother could not share, for it was Erminie's rather than his own. Life seemed very portentous, big with duties and prospects that belonged to a new world. All his past was but a flash, a gleam of childish nonsense. Now he was a man!

CHAPTER III

“POP” STREETER’S PROPOSITION

FOR the first time he could remember, Billy was sleepless till the sun rose. All night long he thought and thought. He had considered his life rather complex—he was leader of one of the patrols of his troop, the Olympics; he had a part in the school drama which he had believed very important. And on waking came the sudden remembrance of the talk Mr. Streeter was to give soon on the matter of Good Citizens’ Clubs. Billy was sponsor for that, and must see it through. Also it looked still more as if he would not be able to avoid the clash with the bully.

But all this was trivial now, childish. He could no longer think of himself alone,—there would be two. That kiss—that kiss was his pledge, a consecration of his life to Erminie’s happiness.

By the time the sun had struck through the

window into his large attic room he had mapped out his course. He would have to continue school till vacation—his mother would insist on that; but by that time he would have secured work of some sort. He regretted having sold the “ha’nt” in California and invested his money with his mother’s—by Mr. Smith’s advice—in the City of Green Hills; but it was too late to change that. Yet he would work hard, attend night school, and prepare himself for his real life-business, which was to be Journalism. He spelled it with a capital, for he would be no small truckling reporter, but a faithful, inspiring leader of the people.

Resolutely he put aside the thought of marriage although it lay, coiled and conscious like fate, at the back of all his plans. Other men married young, why not one more? The conventions were ridiculous; a man was a man when he was grown! He drew himself up and measured again before his mirror. Almost six feet!

Yet he must not subject Erminie to ridicule. The world must see that she was marrying a man who could support and protect her. He

would not have to wait very long,— he looked twenty-one,— and his mother would consent when she saw he was well prepared, saw how pitiful was Erminie's situation. Shyly — though there was none to see — he rubbed his rough chin and wondered how he would look with mustache and imperial.

The elation of the night still lifted him. His body was strangely light; he felt as if he could move a mountain. The need for secrecy increased the stimulation, and he looked on forest, lake, and Sound with new vision. The yellow rose of sunrise touched Cascades and Olympics alike with a splendor he had not before recognized, and lighted the vast reaches between ranges with a clear thin radiance not seen in southern lands.

Billy's heart ached with this new fulness of life. Visions undreamed before opened his eyes to his own manhood; and the impulse came to put this experience into rhythm,—the impulse that touches every normal young creature. Some may not have the wit to fix it on paper, but all sing the song.

Billy sang it,—sang in a lilting, rather diffi-

cult metre, beginning ambitiously with an apostrophe to his love,

“Ermine-white soul of my Erminie,”

and leaping immediately to the next rhyme which should be “burn in me”—he was not acquainted with the exactions of prosody. However, his Muse proceeded for a couple of verses; and if she limped at times, it was no more than appears in the work of some real poets when they push the lady too hard.

He read the lines several times, softly whispering the passionate words. They sounded rather good, though not by a tithe were they adequate. What miserable, foolish little things were written words! Still he marvelled that he could write even these. He would copy them on a typewriter and gave them to Erminie. No one could then guess their authorship, not even her father should he chance upon them.

At breakfast he was silent, preoccupied; but his mother, being tired from a night of watching with the baby, who had been fretful, did not notice Billy, nor object when he said he would not be home at noon.



Billy gazed down on her with tender eyes, his heart beating faster with a manly, protecting feeling new to him

He hurried off, hoping to meet Erminie in the halls before she went to her class-room; but she was barely prompt, passing him as the bell rang, with a hasty nod. Billy thought it cool, till he saw that Walter Buckman was right behind her.

The hours droned by, seemingly interminable. Automatically he went from class to class. Twice he had to be reminded that the bell had tapped. In the midst of defining the powers of the Constitution of the United States of America, he saw a picture of a little house with a vine over it, and Erminie sitting in the tiny living-room. And while walking down the hall to his German Class he built still other castles, followed impossible adventures that involved Erminie, himself, and two other men who wanted her; and vanquished them both just at the moment his teacher said, "Guten Morgen, Herr Bennett."

Yet as the day proceeded, he had to wake to his many duties. At the noon recess he was besieged by boys asking of the meeting to be addressed in the assembly-room by Mr. Streeter, its importance, and if they could not go would

he tell them all about it later? And the girls appealed to him to know if they were *really* invited. A delayed English exercise *had* to be copied; and at the moment—hoped for, watched for—when Erminie went down the main hall on her way back from luncheon, a teacher was explaining to Billy some stubbornly hidden point in his geometry.

Two o'clock came finally, and Billy, waiting till the last moment, hoping vainly to see Erminie, went to the assembly-room, where a crowd of noisy boys waited for Mr. Streeter's coming.

"Who is he, anyway?" asked a boy new to the city and the school.

"He's the best, jolliest ever," Billy answered. "They say he's never grown up and never will. But the boys like him that way, and the fathers and mothers trust him to the limit."

"What does he do?"

"For a living? Nothing now. He's had a fortune come to him, ten times as much a year as he used to earn."

"That must beat the old game for fun."

"He gets his fun with the boys,—spends his

time and money that way. You see he's had the university, Europe, and all that."

When Mr. Streeter tapped for order, it was instant, for he always had some message the boys were eager to hear, though they knew as little of the scope of his work as did their busy fathers.

He had a round, jolly face; and near each end of his brown mustache a dimple that was the envy of every girl who knew him. But in spite of dimples, and kind eyes that grew dark and tender at a tale of suffering, those eyes could compel, the dimples could disappear in a look that few disregarded.

After his greeting, and one of the funny stories that he told well, he said, "I have a message more serious than usual for you to-day, a plan that touches not only you but your city of the future, for which in five years nearly every one of you before me will be responsible.

"I wonder if you know, boys and girls, how different this city of ours is from the older, Eastern cities? It has risen almost by magic. Your fathers and mothers are still busy with their hard fight with nature, cutting down trees and washing mountains into the sea, filling deep

valleys or making land where water was. They don't have time to think of the future.

"But it's coming, and it will have as hard nuts to crack as any we have now. I wonder if you wish to learn a little about them now, before they are dropped down on you?

"Don't we want a beautiful city? Want our city to look as well on post cards as Paris looks, or any city on earth? No city in the world has more beauty from nature; if we should do as well with our building as Paris has with hers, all the people on earth would sell all their goods and travel here to see us,—come any way they could, on foot if they couldn't fly,—to see the beautiful City of Green Hills.

"Do you know how we could have it that way? By making out of every boy and girl living here a good citizen, a patriotic citizen, who would no more be wasteful of her wealth or beauty than he would strike himself. You are beginning here in the right way. Your playground politics, your attempt to make it a clean place, beautiful and pleasant for ear as well as eye,—that is fine. But nothing of that sort amounts to much unless it reaches out to all:

that's it, to *all*. No city is fine or lasting, or ought to last, if the set of people that are making fine avenues and boulevards let its poor folk live in holes and sow tin cans instead of roses in the alleys."

He stopped a moment to get the temper of the meeting. They knew that his hobby was hunting boys, to help them. He hunted them as other men hunt game, or business opportunities. Only the recording angel knew how many waifs he "rounded in for rations." The street boys adored him for his power as well as for his goodness. He was the champion all-round amateur athlete of the town, and though slow to anger, in the language of the "newsies," when "he does let go his bunch o' fives, skidoo the bunch!"

There were plenty of cheers, and cries of, "Go on!"

"Scouts and Sunday schools and school politics are all good; but we need something that includes all in one larger work, as the schools and the city include all. I have thought of a chain of Young Citizens' Clubs that should reach all. How many of you know about your

city, her population, income, resources, officers? Would you like to know? I am willing to lead such a movement if you'd like it.

"There isn't time to tell you in detail all the different schemes I have thought out! Bands—I will see that every boy that will learn is taught to play some instrument; drills, scouting parties in the city to spy out what we'd like to do to make it better; the best speakers in the city and State, to tell us just what sort of a pie the politicians cook for us each year; picnics and camping, to learn how much fun there is out under the sky, and how a man can jolly along without much but a blanket and a frying pan, and have the time of his life; and each year some great celebration the young citizens would themselves manage that would really mean things—all these ideas, our history, our future,—do you get this, young people? Would it be great? Or am I just dreaming?"

They caught the bigness of his idea and responded as heartily as boys and girls always will when they are enlisted.

Jim Barney and his followers were there in force, because it was necessary for them to be

in touch with all that was going on. They saw, or their leader did, that this Good Citizens' Club meant the end of their influence and of his rule.

"Of course you don't mean girls," Jim drawled in a slow, confident tone.

"Can girls be loyal to the city? Isn't your mother as good a citizen as your father?"

It was an unfortunate question. Jim's mother had run off with a man his father despised; while the father, a successful saloon-keeper, and good to Jim according to his light, was the boy's idol.

"You bet she ain't. Women and girls don't count in politics."

The girls scowled, some boys hissed, but too many cheered.

"If they don't count, America is a lie," Mr. Streeter said when the noise had ceased. "Yet even that aspect of the case is futile. The amendment to enfranchise the women of Washington will surely carry; your mothers and sisters will be citizens whether you like it or not. What will you do about it?"

Cheering and laughing, good-natured jeers

and one or two faint hisses followed. But the majority were interested, and an organization on Mr. Streeter's basis followed, with Reginald Steele and Cicero Jones as president and vice-president, Bess Carter secretary, and Billy treasurer. As these four were of the strongest opposers of Jim Barney, it was not surprising that he rose and rather boisterously led his gang out.

Mr. Streeter did not quite understand, but said rivalry was sometimes wholesome, and perhaps Mr. Barney would organize something himself.

"You may think it strange that I come with this proposition so near the end of the school year. I wonder if you will like my further plans? How do you think we can make this most effective? I had thought we could have every member of this club, and those that are forming in the other schools, start a little feeder in his own neighborhood. The Scouts are already enthusiastic. And my biggest notion of all is to have a band in each club; and when these bands are studying and playing about the city, we'll select the very best of them, and the ten best citizens,—that is, those who, on the vote

of all the rest have done most in this work,— and we'll go abroad with them. East, all over our own States, and then to Europe. Well, it's a pretty big jump, that is; I won't propose Mars till next time."

"But that would take a heap of money; we couldn't—" The "doubting Thomas" hesitated and subsided.

"There is a city on this coast where they are doing just that thing. And when, after a tour of six months, those thirty boys came home, having earned their way by their splendid music, and won the applause and good will of all the countries they visited, what do you suppose their own city did? Gave them the freedom of the city, made one of them mayor of the town for a week, and the entire city feted them."

"Well, what do you think of that?" one astonished person upspoke in meeting.

"That may be far away, but I have one idea coming that is n't,—a flag for the city. Do you like that idea? Would it be a good thing for a city to have its own banner floating with the Stars and Stripes on every school house, shop, ship, and home?"

“Has any other city a flag?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Gee! Then we’ll be the first! Let’s have it!”

They cheered this to the satisfaction of even Mr. Streeter.

“I shall offer a prize of fifty dollars for the best design, to be competed for by the members of the Good Citizens’ Clubs. The Chamber of Commerce likes the idea, and will add another fifty. We’ll begin our annual historic pageants this year, in September, and award the prize then. How does that strike you?”

It struck them happily, and they despatched a few more details of the organization, arranged for the meeting hour, and for immediate coöperation with the playground campaign,—for that was good citizens’ work,—and adjourned.

Billy had to remain with Bess after the rest to receive, and receipt for, the money paid in for dues. A teacher gave them a drawer in one of the desks in the library, and Billy had a key to it. On passing out of the larger room he had managed to sign to Erminie, who had attended the meeting, to wait for him. He and Bess fin-

ished their work together, Billy remaining on some invented pretext till after she had gone; though he had to follow her immediately, for the teacher was anxious to lock up and get away.

Very casually, Billy thought, he sauntered along to where Erminie was standing, looking nowhere in particular as he came up, and, under pretence of showing her his club accounts, handed her a folded paper. But even a pair of thoughtless boys passing read his beaming face; and a teacher going by smiled in spite of himself; smiled, and scowled at Erminie without knowing it.

She caught the look, read her own meaning into it, and turned away with a casual, "Thank you, Billy," that chilled him as no wind ever had. He little dreamed she was saving him at her own expense, as she did again a moment later, when the teacher repassed with Barney by his side, and she gave the bully the brilliant smile Billy had expected for his own.

"I didn't mean you should kiss him with your eyes," Billy growled, jealousy flaming so ludicrously in his face that Erminie laughed when she would better have been serious.

“Don’t be foolish, Billy; you told me to square with him. Sh—! Here they come again,” she added, and with a hasty good-bye left Billy to gloom all the way home about that smile.

Of course he himself had advised the recognition, but not like that. Oh, that smile!

He arrived at home to hear that his dear little comrade of earlier days, May Nell Smith, had been hurt and was coming home.

CHAPTER IV

ERMINIE THE UNCERTAIN

A FEW days later May Nell came, and Billy went to see her. On the way, and while waiting in the parlor of her imposing home, he recalled the April evening she had come into Vina on the refugee train from San Francisco, a homeless waif. Driven right into his arms he believed, by the catastrophe, he had led her to his mother's door; and the little girl had walked into their hearts, never to be forgotten.

Yet now she seemed remote,—very young, and out of Billy's life, if not out of memory. He had not seen her since they separated after the summer together at Lallula; and that was far away, a part of another life.

May Nell had never been robust since the terrifying days and nights of the great fire; and her parents sent her to a girls' school in a neighboring town, where health was the first consideration.

The maid came interrupting his memories, and he followed her.

"Come up, Billy!" May Nell called in the well remembered melodious voice.

He was unprepared for the change in her. She had been only slightly hurt in the foot in an automobile accident, and now showed almost no ill effects from it. She seemed no older, no larger, yet different, in a way that Billy could not explain to himself. As she rose impulsively to greet him, leaning gracefully on her cane, he felt in full force once more her charm, her otherworldliness.

Her face had rounded and taken on richer tints; and the gold of her hair and the blue of her eyes were almost ethereal. She was like a beautiful dream, or like some little princess of bygone years stepped from the canvas of an old master.

"Oh, Billy, Billy! How good it is to see you! And how fine of you to come this first day I'm at home."

Billy was only half at ease. He felt old and rude, and in some odd way not good enough to touch her delicate hand, to help her reseat her-

self. "I had to come, you know." And though he smiled he remembered that he had wished he were going to see Erminie instead.

Yet now that he was here he felt widely separated from Erminie. A fancy struck into his mind on the instant between sentences: Erminie was the bright red rose, quickly blooming and quickly fading, that grows luxuriantly in plain view in the valley; May Nell was a rare and delicate yet unwithering orchid that hides on the far mountain side.

"Mama says I am not to return to school till the autumn semester opens."

Again the daintiness, the foreign flavor that attached to all she said or did came with the French "mama."

"That's dandy!" and he gave her a boyish scrutiny. "You're different, older someway; but you're—just as little." A teasing mischief danced in his eyes.

"I *am* older, Billy. Did you think I would always stay a little girl?"

"Thirteen isn't very old."

"It's only three years younger than sixteen."

"I'm much more than sixteen," he objected,

and thought with dismay of Erminie. Could she feel as much beyond him in age as he felt beyond May Nell?

"Well, no matter, Billy. You look twenty. But I'll challenge you on the score of studies, that is, if—if you'll cut out mathematics," she added in a mock-plaintive tone.

"Mathematics is—are?—the whole business," he swaggered; and thus they chaffed themselves back to childhood standing again, and talked on of many matters, each telling of life during the separation.

She was almost well, would soon be ready to join in their sports again. Going home, Billy thought over his changed future. The gay days were coming when May Nell and his cousins, Hector, Hugh, and little Miss Snow, as they called their little sister, would all go chugging around the Sound among the beautiful Thousand Islands, or startle the silences of night and day at lovely Lallula.

But he would not be there. He would be drudging at some sort of hard work; making a beginning in his long, hurrying climb toward an income that would warrant him in taking Er-

minie to a home of their own. Suddenly the future looked bigger and darker, and he mentally drew back from it; but instantly chid himself for a coward.

He need not. He was only a boy. How was he to know that he was not yet able to endure long mental strain; that this depression was the inevitable reaction from exciting days, and nights with little or no sleep?

On his way he met Bess Carter.

"Hello, Queen of Sheba!" he called as she was passing him, her head up, eyes unheeding.

"Oh! Billy! I'm glad you spoke. We're so busy I'm totally absorbed and don't have time to see my friends."

"Evidently not. What is it? Politics?"

"Yes. Though it doesn't seem like that. I thought politics was something tremendous and difficult and—rather bad. But since mother says women are to be enfranchised and I must learn things, and since I heard Mr. Streeter, it really appears merely a sort of housekeeping for the city, or State, or whatever; easy, but lots of work."

"When you've heard more from Mr. Streeter

you'll see that any kind of housekeeping that's worth while isn't so easy; though it's simpler when all the people have a pride in it."

"Yes. Do you know, Billy, I'd never have been allured by it if he had n't said that one who forgot or abused his city was the same as one who forgot home or demolished the furniture." Bess retained her fondness for long words.

"That was rather striking."

"And now I'm in—deep in the girls' reform party; and we are going to participate in the Progressives' playground rally to-night. Will you be there?"

"Sure. But what will the girls do?"

"We wish to address the meeting. It's especially to bring about better conditions on the playground; and the student body will take some part there if Hector is president."

"Yes."

"You know the boys of the Fifth Avenue High have an unconscionable name there."

"Yes; and it's only a few that have given it that reputation. You're going some for girls. How did you get the chance to butt in on the rally?"

"Oh, Billy, doesn't the school and the playground belong to girls as well as to boys? Have not we a right to be heard?"

"Sure. But how is it the boys let you?"

"Hector told the managers of the meeting that if they wanted him to speak they'd have to let us in too."

"Good. I'll be there."

"And—Billy—" Her hesitation was unprecedented.

Billy's eyes questioned.

"It's about the—Erminie Fisher."

"Well?" This time the eyes warned.

"They're talking about her—the girls don't like her."

"Anything else?" There was a steel-like quality in his voice that Bess Carter had never suspected.

"Yes. She's working for Jim Barney's ticket, and you must make her—only you can—make her stop, or Hector won't win." She was intensely in earnest now, all her loyalty to Billy fighting for him. "Billy! That girl is no good friend to you, and she'll spoil everything if you don't stop her."

"I think you're mistaken," he said, after a silence that puzzled and chilled her.

"She won't join the Girls' Branch of the Progressives, nor register. And she says if Hector Price is elected he will turn the student body into a kindergarten; at least that's what Walter Buckman said she said." She pumped out the words breathily.

"Any more slams on her?"

"Oh, Billy, I'm no tattler. It is n't *what* they say; it's the looks and sniggers that say more than words. No one would dare to tell *me* anything anyway; they know I'm your friend, Billy, your California friend."

He caught the emotion in her voice, knew that in all the world he had not a more devoted friend, a more fearless champion than Bess Carter. "You're to the good, Bess. I shall try to deserve your kindness." He lifted his cap and passed on, leaving her troubled and mystified.

He found his mother busy over her window plants. After an anxious inquiry as to dinner, which settled the fact that he would have to wait ten minutes, he stood watching her in such an unusual silence that she noticed it and rallied him.

“What’s happening in Calcutta, Billy?”

“Not in Calcutta; right here. What are you killing all those little babies for?”

Mrs. Bennett straightened up and looked at him, startled. “It does seem almost like that, doesn’t it? But if I don’t pinch these buds the plants will be less thrifty, perhaps die.”

“Why?”

“It’s warm here in this room, and the plant has hurried to put out buds before the root has struck deep enough. It would be unwise to let it come to flower now.”

“Doesn’t Nature know best how to do things?”

“Not always. Nature is very wasteful. Besides, I’ve robbed these plants of Nature’s care, taken them into artificial conditions; so I must stand in place of Nature to them.”

“Suppose the plant gets discouraged and won’t bloom at all?”

“It won’t do that; blooming is the law of its life.”

He was silent a moment before asking, “I wonder if that is true in—in other ways—that about blooming too soon?”

“Yes, true of all Nature. Fruit grown or gathered prematurely is always poor, tasteless; still more important, the seeds produce poorer stock.”

“I don’t quite understand. I thought young flowers were finest. Didn’t you say pansies wouldn’t have fine blooms the second or third year?”

“Yes. That is because naturally the pansy is an annual. Only in warm climates does it live through the winter; when it does, the second season is merely a prolonged old age.”

“How about animal life?”

“The law is the same. In hot climates where boys and girls marry early the races are not strong, dominant. And in our own latitude the children of well-grown, well-trained men and women are stronger mentally and physically than those whose parents marry in their teens.”

Billy winced. “I should think that—that—well, when boys and girls are old enough to care for each other that would mean they were old enough to marry.”

“In the dawn of the race when men were no wiser than the plants, when they lived naturally,

it did mean that. But as the race unfolds and we make artificial conditions, man sees more fully perhaps the meaning of God's command to him to have dominion over every thing on the earth. Man's growing wisdom is in charge over Nature to mould her material forms to higher, ever higher perfection."

"Then why is it that kids do marry? Why do they want to before they ought?"

"Why do you wish to eat before you are really hungry? Why do you wish to run, leap, dance, be ever on the move, whether you have conscious need for motion or not? Why does a baby try to walk before its legs will bear it?"

Billy grinned. "You're too deep for me, marms."

"Because Nature is often blind. To preserve the race is her first business. She sacrifices the one to the welfare of the many. Man, exercising the power God gave him, sees that only as each one comes to his best, will he contribute to the race the best possible stock. Therefore our wisest thinkers say that all should wait till at least well in the twenties before marriage."

Billy was thoughtful for a minute. "What of

the fellow who likes a girl so well that he can't keep—well, keep from thinking of her?" He knew very well that his mother cast a quick look at him, but he did not meet her eye, and she went quietly on with her employment of snipping and digging.

"That is a very deep question, one to which you should give much study. There are books prepared especially to answer such questions. For ages man has been developing unevenly. The truth is that men and women are nine-tenths alike; that is, human—eating, drinking, suffering, joying, loving each other and mankind alike, and dying alike. Only in about one-tenth of their natures are they different, this being the difference of sex."

"Gee! That seems strange."

"But is it? Look at Bess Carter. She has been reared most wisely. Is she not nearly as much of an athlete as you are? What is there that you can do that she cannot?"

Billy scowled. He remembered uncomfortably a day when a little child had fallen into the edge of the lake, and Bess had outrun him and rescued her just as he was arriving. Also he was

more uncertain than he liked as to their relative percentage for the year.

"She's an exception," he evaded.

"So are you. Few boys of your age are as well developed. Yet you could not endure, except for a momentary spurt, perhaps, what, with no accident or illness you will be able to endure at twenty-three. Mentally the difference will be nearly the same."

"Why do people marry so young, then?"

"For many reasons. Children are not taught these things as they should be taught. Boys who leave school early and earn for themselves usually have no aim beyond mere physical satisfaction, no large ideals to follow, and become a prey to natural emotions they yield to but do not understand."

"How about the others—and girls?"

"The young man who takes a longer school course or a profession must put his whole effort to succeeding in that. He cannot take the burden of a family life, and he has his work, sports, various matters to occupy his attention, and all his forces combine to the making of his higher success. It is about the same with girls."

"But why shouldn't they love each other, be engaged and wait?"

He thought it a long time before she answered. When at last she turned and looked deep in his eyes her voice took on the tender tone he knew, and her words were grave. "Billy, think back to the time when you were a little boy and the apples, full grown and gloriously tinted but hard as wood, tempted you from their leafy nests. What would have happened if you had fondled and pinched each one?"

Billy's eyes darkened. "I—I—see."

"Would it have been the fault of the apple if it had become later a dented, spotted thing with decay setting in before it had really ripened?"

"No." He writhed inwardly at the conclusions forced upon him.

"Remember, Billy, every girl is like an apple slowly ripening toward womanhood."

The room was very still, and they stood together, Billy's arm close about her waist, looking out upon the distant shimmering lake. At length she lifted her head suddenly and spoke with a singular passion.

"My boy, the love relation between a man and

a woman is the holiest one on earth. It may begin in passion, but if true, it ends in a constant devotion that opens the door of heaven. Since this is God's way of keeping his race going it is blasphemy to speak or even think coarsely of it, or to enter upon it except devoutly. If there is one relation in life that should be given preparation, almost I would say that should be entered upon with prayer and fasting, it is that by which you shall become responsible for the welfare of future beings, your children."

She was trembling, and Billy knew now that she understood him; that even if she did not know the one he loved, she knew the fact. He could not deceive her, nor did he wish it. He felt relieved that she knew, though he could not bring himself to speak of it. He thought it was because he must not let any one intrude on Erminie's privacy, but the reason lay deeper than that, deeper than he could then know.

The dinner was brought in. He had forgotten his hurry; but now it returned, and he hastened his meal and excused himself to go to the rally.

He went round by Erminie's home. He

wished to ask her of the situation Bess had described. He was sure she could clear up everything that troubled him, sure she could defend her course no matter how it might look to others. Perhaps she really disbelieved in politics for girls; if so, she had a right to her opinion.

Yet why had she openly assisted the school bully? That was as much a political move as the other, and not so frank; more, it was exceedingly unpopular. She could not be associated with Jim in any matter, and hold the good-will of the best girls in school.

A hot wave swept over him. Whatever she did, he must stand by her now, make life for her better, not worse. Yet how could he do it? Open interference between her and Barney would be disastrous.

Still questioning anxiously of himself he rang the bell; once, twice, and a third time. No one answered, and after a wait and another ring he went back to the playground, and found a noisy, chaotic scene.

Redtop was manager. He had planned a rally in imitation of the campaign meetings of real politics. There would be speeches, and the

candidates for the playground officers would be presented. There could be no rules, of course, as if in a room, but three boys were appointed to keep order, Billy being one. And everybody was welcome.

Apparently the cityful had arrived before Billy. As he approached, Redtop, perspiring and anxious, called, "Billy Next Week, come on! Get busy! Hold down those kids, will you? This meeting's got a football game skinned silly on noise."

"All right," Billy responded cheerfully. "Shall I scare 'em or run 'em in?"

"Oh, anything. Cop 'em or duck 'em. Here! Take this." He pinned a badge of authority on Billy's coat.

Billy started through the wriggling, shifting mass of boys of many nationalities from fair-faced Swede to swarthy Italian and garrulous Irish boy, with quiet, squat Japanese fringing the edges.

"The cop's coming!" ran derisively from lip to lip along the crowd, which curved back at his approach, only to close in behind him with more and more noise.

"Say! Fellers!" Billy wheeled and called to the nearest, "What's the matter of helping here and getting the taffy a little later?"

"Sure, Mike," cried some. And others asked, "Where's the taffy?"

Billy laughed and touched his lip. "You'll get as much as I will."

"What's that?"

"The fun. See? Now hike, and bring those benches over here." He waved his doubled fist at them as if it were a club; and thirty or more hurried off laughing, and began to labor with the park benches which they set in semi-circular rows on the grass around a central bench between two torches, that was the speakers' stand.

Coming on Sis Jones a moment later, Billy asked him to look after the bench brigade, which he did, crying out to Billy when he passed again, "Gee! This is work! Where's the reward?"

"Where mine is," Billy jeered. "Look at the girls; they're doing half of the work." He nodded to a dozen or more struggling by with the heavy seats, one bending alone under the weight of a short bench, and refusing help.

"Look at the strong Miss Kid!" shouted a small boy.

"The mighty suffragette!" another fleered.

The girls only laughed, straightened a little, and tugged on.

Some of the Kid's followers caught Sis Jones, stripped off his coat, tied a girl's hat on him with a scarf, threw a girl's wrap over him, pulled off his shoes and socks, and dragged him forward into the circle of light, only to be themselves caught and lashed to trees farther back.

Billy and his helpers rushed about frantically. Redtop mounted his bench platform and tried to call the meeting to order; but the uproar increased, and after a moment of vain gesticulating for quiet he stepped down amid wildest cheers.

Two large boys swung a little negro back and forth, head down, commanding him to sing. Too frightened to emit a sound he finally wriggled away from them and fled like a rabbit, with a dozen yelling buffoons after him.

A third group crowned a tiny girl with evergreen, lifted her to their close-touching shoulders, and paraded with her around the open

space, shouting, "Madam President!" "I rise to a point of order!" "I have the floor—" "No, no! It's the ground!" and a lot more nonsense.

The pranks went on while those in charge conferred apart upon the question of handling the mob, each in turn bolstering the courage of the rest.

"Gee whiz! I didn't expect any of the real thing—voters and mamas," Redtop panted as he lunged back after his inauspicious beginning. "What are we to do?"

"If we fizzle out, the girls will never stop guying us," Sis Jones groaned; "they toted almost as many benches as we did."

"Get a girl to start the meeting; they're keen on it, and maybe the fellows wouldn't give it to a girl so—so in the neck."

"Where's Hec? What does he say?"

"I say we've got to beat that crowd into respect, or not only the Progressives will lose their election, but we'll lose ours."

"But this is no meeting for the student body," Redtop urged.

"No. But Barney and Buckman and their

crowd know that nearly every one who will vote for me is mixed up in this playground fight on the side of the Progressives. The Good Citizens' Club stands for the Progressives too."

"You go speak to them now, Hec," Redtop urged.

"No, he can't," Billy objected. "He's the principal speaker of the evening; he must be introduced properly."

Behind them stood Bess Carter bursting with indignation. "You boys haven't the spunk of a flea!" she taunted, and before they could reply she was standing on the bench gazing fearlessly but silently around on the mob. Her advent, so sudden and unheralded, touched the most quieting element of a crowd, its curiosity.

Tall, erect, her dark eyes flashing in the light of the torches, her beauty enhanced by her air of refinement and womanliness,—her power was felt by every little hoodlum there as keenly as by the older people.

"Gee! The Queen of Sheba 'll do the trick!" Billy ejaculated softly.

For what seemed to be minutes she stood, motionless except for her quick-glancing eyes,

calmly waiting for perfect silence. It came at length, and she bowed gracefully and smiled as if she had expected nothing else.

“Ladies and gentlemen and fellow students: I did not mount this rostrum to make a speech, only to announce that the meeting is about to begin, and that we shall expect quiet. For really good Americans this is an unnecessary request. For any others who may possibly be here we have behind us real American policemen who will take charge of them.”

She bowed and in a moment was back among the anxious group again, while the audience clapped and roared, and the high school boys shouted “Hooray for the Queen!” “Bully for her!” and other elegant expressions that nevertheless held only admiration.

“Bess! What did you say that for? We have no police—”

“Not now, but we’re going to! I never saw such barbarians! I’m going to telephone for the police!” Before any could stop her she was flying across the street to find a telephone.

Taking advantage of the lull that followed her speech, Redtop mounted the bench and in

the briefest way announced the programme and introduced the first speaker, who was Reginald Steele. Hector was to follow him, and Billy was to be called on for an impromptu speech, when he would introduce one or two of the girls.

But this programme was never carried out. Before Reginald got to his "secondly," two boys sprang at the torches and extinguished them; half a dozen bunches of firecrackers began to explode in different localities; and a scream from the wading pool at the same moment completed the panic.

The long twilight had faded and the scattered park lamps shed only faint gleams.

"There's no danger! Every one go home quietly!" shouted one man. And another called, "The little chap that screamed fell into the wading pool. He isn't hurt, and has gone home."

In five minutes the playground was deserted and silent under the quiet stars. Billy remained to the last, searching in vain for Erminie. He had seen her there, and expected her to wait for him. On a sudden impulse he decided to go across to her home.

As he neared the house he saw her standing under the porch light with Jim Barney. Her face was in the shadow, and he could not hear their words; but he knew from their low, tense tones and Jim's eager, bending attitude, that their conversation was important.

Billy watched them an instant, dazed and uncertain, yet tormented by the tender pleading in an occasional tone that floated out to him in Erminie's voice. But eavesdropping Billy despised; and as soon as he could recover himself he turned away, his disappointment at the utter failure of the meeting pushed to insignificance by this puzzling, sinister, covert situation that included both Erminie and Jim. Billy was utterly perplexed. What could she mean?

Slowly, his feet weighing tons, he plodded home, and entered to find the telephone ringing.

He hurried to take down the receiver that the household might not be disturbed. "Who is it?"

"Erminie," came back over the wire. "Oh, Billy, I'm so glad to get you!"

"Yes?" Billy could not keep the coldness out of his voice. He was hearing again the ten-

der eagerness in her tone as the Kid bent over her twenty minutes before.

"Oh, I don't wonder you speak in that Alaska voice, Billy; but you don't know everything. Billy, dear, won't you trust me? Just for a few days?"

"I—I'd like to," he sent back huskily over the wire. Even at that distance he could feel her power over him, hear the caress in each word.

"You may, Billy. And you won't be sorry. Good-night."

Without another word she "hung up," leaving Billy a trifle comforted but more perplexed than ever.

CHAPTER V

ERMINIE FUMBLES THE GAME

TWO weeks later came the annual Junior picnic. It was a variation this year in being set for evening. They had chartered a steamer and were to stop at one of the wildest points on A-mo-té Island.

There was merely a little clearing, with one or two rustic pavilions for shelter against rain, and the dancing platform. This last was rated the best out-of-doors dancing floor anywhere around the city or its suburbs, and was correspondingly popular with young people.

Billy started off in fine spirits with a basket his mother had prepared, and a proud feeling that he would not be ashamed to open it in the presence of any girl. He had begged Erminie to let him bring the luncheon for the two of them; and when he met her as agreed at the trolley line transfer point, care-free, erect and strong, his eyes shining with anticipation, it was little

wonder that he saw an answering look of pleasure and pride in her eyes. He was a young man any girl might feel it a privilege to know; better still, older and deeper-seeing ones, mothers, would turn to observe him and wish their own sons might be like him.

"On time, Erminie!" he greeted gayly as he helped her from the car almost before it came to a stop. "Good girl!"

"Isn't it perfect?" She met his frank gaze cordially. "Just warm enough, and the moon is full."

The week had been a hard one for her. She had struggled to hold the good-will of Jim Barney without allowing him the familiarities he had once enjoyed; familiarities she would allow no boy after knowing Billy. She was anxious that Billy's side in both school and playground politics should win, but she knew the only way she could help him was to remain good friends with Jim.

She used her utmost subtlety to exact from him a pledge of civility toward Billy and Hector, and found this was the hardest bit of management she had ever undertaken. The Kid

was as keen as she was, and had a half womanish intuition that matched her own. And Erminie could no longer juggle with the truth as formerly; it hurt her. When taxed with undue interest in Billy, her denials did not ring true; and her witty sallies ridiculing Jim were half-hearted. Had he been less in love, or Erminie less than altogether beautiful and charming, she would have made no impression.

Billy had looked forward to this day as one of reckoning. With this in view he had insisted that Erminie go to the picnic with him openly. "Don't you frame up to go with Jim," he had whispered days before, in a moment of waiting in the rain for a car at the school corner; "I won't stand for it this time; I've things to say to you."

"Oh! It's good to be with you once more, just us two," she said, as they went aboard, and forward to the very peak of the bow of the steamer.

But there was too much hilarity for any two, however absorbed, to remain unnoticed.

"Oh, here you are, Fishie!" one jolly girl shouted, and bore down on them, dragging in

her train others with boys following. "We don't need spoons at this picnic! Come on, you—the boys are going to get the band to play so we can dance." She pulled Erminie to her feet; and shortly two or three dozen couple were whirling around on the crowded deck.

Erminie and Billy took a turn or two and dropped out, preferring to wait for the ampler room and smoother floor of the pavilion. Yet when they sought their places forward again, and the music and preoccupation of the dancers isolated them almost as much as walls would have done, neither of them could speak of what was uppermost in both minds. The hour and the surroundings were not propitious.

Billy fretted inwardly. There was much to say. She must know all his plans; all he had thought and dreamed since that evening—was it only a few days ago?—in the park, that evening that had changed all his life. Still these were serious matters, even sacred. He could not bring himself to mention them here, where unsympathetic eyes might read his emotions in his face; he was not an adept at hiding them as Erminie was.

When the hour's trip was nearly over she gave him a quick nudge with her arm. "There's Jim!" She looked down the stairway.

"Where? I thought you said he wasn't coming."

"So I did. He said he had work to do."

"Work!" Billy's tone held a fine scorn. "Did you think any one would stay away for that? I wouldn't. I've worked in our garden till nearly ten o'clock some of the nights this week, so I might feel free for to-day. I didn't know till yesterday it was changed to an evening affair."

But Erminie was not heeding. "Billy, you must not let Jim see —"

"Jim be hanged! You've put me off for days with that plea. I'm not afraid of the Kid, I —"

"Oh, Billy! Won't you listen —"

"Not to one word. I brought you to this picnic; I have the lunch, and you're going to sit it out with me while we eat, and dance with me, and go home —"

While he spoke Jim and Walter Buckman came up from the lower deck, in animated discussion of some matter that pleased them both. The dancers had stopped, and nearly all were

standing in groups at the rail, watching the shore come nearer as the puffing craft approached the landing.

“Oh, you Fishie!” Jim sang out on seeing her. “You’re going to feed with Buck and me; we’ve got the grub and—”

Billy rose, and every vestige of his light good humor faded; was replaced by a sternness Jim had never seen. “Miss Fisher has consented to be my partner for the evening; and I also have the—the grub.” Erminie herself could not have edged a sarcasm with finer scorn than Billy threw into his last word.

Jim eyed him in surprise for a second, then broke out in a loud voice, “Well, Miss Fisher belongs to—” His eyes burned red and his hands clenched involuntarily.

His companion though not as bright was more prudent than Jim; also he was selfish; he wanted the presidency, and knew that open hostility in any direction endangered his chances. “Come off, Kid! You always kick in for fair play.” And ingratiatingly bowing to Erminie, “Probably Miss Fisher was engaged to Mr. Bennett first.”

"Mr. Bennett nothing! By jiminy!—"

But Erminie interrupted glibly. "I've expected to come to this picnic with Billy ever since I knew there was to be one."

"But I told you—"

She laughed nervously. "Jim Barney, you've told me a good many things lately; but if you are Boss of the Fifth Avenue High you're not my boss."

The words were not out of her mouth before she knew that all of her plot and subterfuge of the past weeks was lost. Daily her repugnance to Jim and his methods had been growing. She had tolerated, wheedled him, only that it might be easier for Billy till the end of the term. Now, with that day only two weeks off, she had in a moment undone all she had gained.

Yet even in that instant of dismay she was filled with relief. She need dissemble no more. She could be straight with Billy and fight Jim in the open. She would tell Bess Carter a little—what she needed to tell, join the Progressives, and be with those she believed were doing well.

Jim was angry through and through, and too astonished to speak immediately; and in the

moment of his hesitancy Walter Buckman led him away.

"Billy! Billy!" Erminie whispered as she started up. "You don't know what an awful thing I've done!"

"You've done what I wished you would do long ago, and I'll stand for whatever happens." A proud light shone in his eye that she saw others besides herself could read.

"I'm going to speak to Bess Carter,—tell her that I'll work with her. Anyway it will be better if I'm not seen with you till the Kid's mad cools off."

She started across the deck but he detained her. "Erminie! Did you promise Jim you'd come—come here with—"

"No, Billy, he took it for granted. I laughed and let it go so, for that was my game then. But—oh, Billy! I've fumbled everything! And it's going to be hard for you when I was trying to make it—"

"Never mind me. I can fight my own battles."

The steamer bumped the wharf, lurching the standing ones against one another; and the

merry confusion of disembarking drove all serious matters to cover of silence. The few teachers, making as little as possible of their duties as chaperons, let the young people manage things for themselves.

Dinner was the first consideration; and as no one there knew quite so much about coffee as Reginald Steele and Billy, that was their job, which occupied them wholly, together with Bess Carter, skilled in cookery through use of the tiny rock fireplace on the bank of Runa Creek in "good old California."

Erminie, who had no more idea of how to make coffee for three hundred than she had concerning heavenly ambrosia, hovered close to the three, anxious to tell Bess of her change of heart, yet more anxious to keep away from Jim Barney, and most of all to be near Billy, who meant strength and deliverance to her.

It was early June and the sun still high at seven o'clock, when they began dinner. In groups of several, with perhaps fifty sitting in comfort at the long table in the bark-roofed pavilion, but oftenest in couples seated apart in the many nooks of the small clearing, they chattered

and feasted, punctuating the meal with many noisy pranks and repeated yells.

Erminie had expected this to be the moment for the quiet talk with Billy. No less had he looked forward to it; but the coffee pots were an unanticipated tyranny. The making did not end the care. The pots were not large enough, and more water had to be heated, and a second lot made for the thirsty crowd. Billy had barely spread his cloth, with Erminie's help laid out the contents of his attractive basket, when the call came; and his time till all the rest were satisfied, was spent in running back and forth, bolting sandwiches on the way.

And so it happened that dinner was over and the fiddlers already calling eager feet, while Billy was finishing his meal.

"It's too bad, Billy! You let every one impose on you."

"No matter. You shall be next. Impose on me as much as you like. Is it dancing?"

"Nothing doing. You like that as well as I do."

"Let's try it then. You can cook up something later in the imposition line."

They piled the remnants of the dainty meal into the basket and went to the pavilion.

The music, the perfect evening, all conditions were auspicious for restless young creatures who inevitably love the motion and harmony of dancing; and Erminie and Billy enjoyed it more than most people do, for they were both musical and danced well.

It was an "informal" to-night, with no programmes, each making engagements for but two or three dances ahead. Billy wished he did not have to dance with any one but Erminie; indeed he did sit out most of the dances he did not have with her; sat and watched her as she whirled by him, scarcely touching the floor, it seemed. In the earlier evening he thought he wanted nothing else but the chance to take her away by herself and talk; but the music and the motion intoxicated both of them, and when he held her in his arms, in their favorite dance, each movement so attuned that they felt as one being, he wished they might glide on and on, with no thought of time.

But musicians tire if dancers do not; and when at last the best dance of all stopped

abruptly he drew her away. The boys had gone variously dressed, and as the evening was warm many of them, among others Billy, had laid aside their coats.

"You must get your coat, Billy," Erminie warned as they went out of the pavilion. "Mine too. I hung them both on that big cedar. I'll walk on."

When he went to find them he noticed some one start hastily away from the tree and slip around the other side. He wondered a little why any one should be there instead of dancing, but he was too absorbed with Erminie to think long of anything else; and he ran back to her, putting on his coat as he went.

"Is it all right?" he asked as he helped her on with hers.

"Yes. Did you think it had changed color?"

"I might have taken the wrong one, you know."

"Billy, let's go round by those trees to a place I know that's beautiful,—high above the water."

"That goes. Is it far? We mustn't be late to the boat."

“Only a little way, a block or two. We can hear the whistle and run.”

They followed a smooth trail to a jutting point where the underbrush had been cut and a rustic seat placed to catch the full beauty of the view.

The warm fragrance of the evening, the pulsing melodies that floated to them softened by distance and foliage, the brilliant moon silvering the broad lake that splashed softly at their feet, the ghostly mountain in the south looming into the sky till it seemed a white pathway right into heaven itself,—it is little wonder that they sat silent, entranced for a moment, each thrilled by the spell of the night.

Erminie was the first to speak. “Billy, I can’t tell you how sorry I am for that break.”

“I’m glad.”

“It’s something terrible. Jim’ll make you pay for it,—me too, for he isn’t above hurting a girl; but I deserve it, and—”

Billy turned, quickly moving closer. “Erminie, you must not worry about this thing any longer. He’ll have to reckon with me on more than one count. I—hoped to get through the

year without a clash, but I see it's bound to come; when it does I'll get in your score too."

"No, no, Billy! You mustn't fight him! He'll say things, do things that will lose Hector the vote because you are his cousin. He'll—" She broke off suddenly and covered her face with her hands.

Billy reached over and drew one hand down in his own. "Erminie!" His voice was tender. "I can't let you worry about this. You must tell me just why you are afraid of him, so I won't be doing things in the dark."

She lifted her face to the moonlight and sighed; and Billy thought she had never been so lovely, never so womanly. "Oh, Billy!" There was a catch in her voice that made his hand close quickly on hers. "Before I knew you I thought it great fun to be engaged to several boys at once—Jim was one of them. It was like a game, and—"

"Yes?" he prompted, and did not know that his grasp of her hand loosened.

"I'm ashamed to tell about it now, but I thought it all right then. I used to like to see how the different ones did it, to see if I could

catch the difficult ones—” She stopped again, divining Billy’s disapprobation; but when he did not speak she continued:

“I thought it fun to watch them get jealous of each other; to plan to keep them apart or let them meet, whichever I was in the mood for at the time.”

“What did your mother say? Did she know?” Billy asked after an instant of silence.

“Oh, yes. I used to tell her a lot. It was about all the pleasure she had,—poor ma! Her life’s awfully dull. Hearing about my courting affairs keeps her sort of waked up.”

“Did she approve?”

Erminie laughed at his solemn tone. “Sure. She said it was all good practice; would teach me how to land big game when it came my way.”

Another and a longer silence awed the girl. Billy had no idea that the seconds were ticking by interminably to her; he was trying to place in his mind the Erminie just revealed to him. Her measure of life was so different from any he knew; her mother so—so impossible as a mother, repelled him as a travesty on woman-

hood. Yet recalling her from his few glimpses he could not help a feeling of pity mingling with his condemnation.

It was natural, though he could not have told why, that he should blame Erminie's mother, her father, any one and every one rather than herself. She was near him. She was beautiful,—to-night with the calm moon glorifying, etherealizing her face, more than ever beautiful,—and she could not help doing things differently from—his sister, for instance, who had been so differently reared.

“Billy! Why don't you talk to me? Don't look off at nothing as if I were not on earth! I'm not like that now. I know you, and—”

He took her hand again in the closer clasp, and she saw a new look in his face, the look his mother saw when they discussed together the deep things of life. “Erminie, I have been trying to see your life as you see it. You know my mother is—she talks things over with me—the things a chap needs to know before he starts out for himself; and I have come to see pretty deep into—into the sort of thing that's between us,

engagements and that; what it means to one's whole life, what it means to the race."

"Why, Billy! Billy! Does your mother talk to you of such things?"

He smiled innocently at her vehemence. "Why not? My father is dead; who would tell me things if she didn't?"

She looked out over the shimmering moon-track on the water. "I—I never heard of such a thing."

"Do you think the Creator makes anything bad?"

"Why—why I suppose not," she returned, wonderingly.

"That's the point; He does n't. It's only us that make wrong out of his creations."

A shrill whistle startled them.

"Billy! It can't be time to go!" She started up.

"That must be the first whistle." He looked at his watch and calmly pulled her back to the seat. "It's only ten; ten-thirty is leaving time. If we start ten minutes before we'll have scads of time." He dropped his watch back into his coat pocket.

"That's no place to carry a watch," she chaffed as they readjusted themselves.

"Yes, it is, for I'm such a kid for dropping it when I bend over anything, a fire for instance. And then my coat is always off."

They talked on, but of other matters. Both were relieved at the interruption of the tense moment, yet Erminie had a regret she could not understand. More than ever Billy attracted her because of his larger, deeper knowledge. He knew the forbidden things, things she only whispered about, yet on his lips they had a dignity, a purity unbounded. He never made silly jokes where reverence was due, yet never went out of his way to avoid anything that came in the natural course of conversation. He was the only one she knew who did this; and she wished she, too, might have such an open mind toward life.

"Billy! The music has stopped!" She rose hastily and started down the path.

"Oh, I guess it's only the wait between dances." But he was suddenly conscious that it had been long, and hurried after her.

They turned the point where the pavilion

came to view to see it looming dark and deserted. From the wharf the noise of embarking came warningly.

"Gee! They're going!" Billy caught her hand and ran with her down the steep hill.

But they were too late. When first they started, the steamer was setting off. Now she was well out in the lake, headed northward.

Billy called at the top of his voice; and Erminie added her frantic shriek to his; but the band was playing, the young people shouting and "jollying," and no one heard. The two could hear sudden gusts of laughter rising above the music, and after that the steady rhythm and beat of the instruments.

"Oh, Billy, it's no use!" Erminie sobbed, as the boat grew smaller and smaller on the gray water.

"I guess we're in for a night of it on a desert island."

They faced each other there in the moonlight, silent, wondering, perplexed.

CHAPTER VI

THE REVEALING NIGHT

FOR minutes they stood looking after the boat. They could not believe it true. Left on the island, far from any habitation! It seemed as if some one *must* miss them, as if the steamer would surely come chugging back after them.

But instead it went farther and farther away, and presently out of sight.

As the last gleam of light disappeared around a far point of land, Erminie turned in dismay.

"Oh, Billy, do you know the way to the Beckets'?"

"Who are they? I never heard of them."

"They live on this island, but I don't know the direction."

"The island is five miles long and wooded like a jungle. We might wander in a circle for hours and not get five hundred yards from where we started." Billy spoke calmly and rather ab-

sently. He was sizing up the situation, trying to see the best way out of it. While they talked, clouds that had been earlier hovering on the horizon, now joined and veiled the moon.

"Gee! If Luna goes back on us we'll have to give up travel by land."

"Perhaps there's a boat — canoe or rowboat."

"I'll see. You stay here a minute —"

She caught his hand. "Billy! If you leave me I'll scream; and if I do that I'll faint, I know I will. There may be wild cats!"

Billy laid an impressive hand on her arm. "Kid, there are no wild animals about here. We're just as safe here as anywhere. And whatever comes, we've got to buck up and take it, haven't we?"

"Ye-es, I suppose so. Oh, I'll try to be game if — if only you won't leave me, Billy."

"All right. It's partnership, then. Come on."

They went to the wharf and skirted the lake up and down a few steps, but found nothing.

"Perhaps that path we took leads to some house," Erminie suggested.

They climbed the hill to the pavilions again,

and followed the path; but it ended in the little clearing where they had sat a few minutes before—hours it seemed to Billy.

“Possibly there’s some other trail leading off from the park; let’s investigate.”

They went back, and slowly, and with many scratches from blackberry vines, Billy leading, they felt their way around it, diving into the dense thickets at each promising bit of openness, only to be met after a few steps with close-woven vines, breast-high ferns braided like a net, or fallen logs covered with briars.

Erminie stumbled and almost fell; rose pluckily before Billy could reach her; tried again; fell prone the next time, and was not quite on her feet when he came.

“Erminie, you can’t stand this. We’ll have to give it up. It’s so dark anyway with the moon hidden that if there was a path we’d likely miss it.”

“What then, Billy? We can’t give up trying.”

“Suppose we try the shore again. Perhaps we can make it that way to some house.”

She agreed, and they went to the water’s edge

and started north. But their progress was stopped by the very promontory from which, high above, they had looked out on the moonlit lake. The bank rose perpendicularly from the water, which was deep here; and the only way to proceed was to climb back to the cleared space and down on the other side, a course they had already proved unfeasible.

Next they tried the southern way. Unlike the shores of salt water, there was no beach to be bared by lowering tides; and they could only pick their way along shore at the edges of the same dense growth as above, a growth that in spots even trespassed on the water.

They succeeded in going some distance; and once were cheered by discovering an unmistakable path; but when they had followed it a little distance it grew less plain, and broke into half a dozen blind trails which all ended in the blank wall of green.

They tried one or two of these, their courage and Erminie's strength growing less with each effort.

"What made trails like these, I wonder?" Billy asked, half to himself.

“Could they be deer trails? There were ever so many on the island years ago; dad used to come here to hunt.”

“Whatever they are they aren’t for us.” Billy looked at his watch. “Twelve o’clock! We’ve been thrashing round for nearly two hours, and got nowhere; and you’re all in, Erminie. We must go back to the picnic ground and think out some other scheme.”

Erminie made no objection. She was too weary and frightened to do anything but fall in with his suggestions. Billy himself, as perplexed as she was, and with the added weight of responsibility for her safety, felt the need of a little respite for fresh planning.

In silence they climbed the hill again, each thankful for the broad smooth path that led up from the steamer landing.

“The first thing is a snack, Erminie. It’s a great thing for us that my mother’s eyes are bigger than our appetites,—at least for a first trial.”

He left her in the pavilion and went to look for his basket, but it was gone. Puzzled and more weary than he knew till this fresh disappointment revealed it, he dropped to the ground

for an instant in sheer discouragement. What next? They would have to remain all night,—there was no other way. And what would that mean?

For himself it did not matter; he would tell his people just how it happened, and they would believe him; they always did. But Erminie—would other people—strangers—believe? Think as well of her as before? Would her father—Her father! What would he say? Billy knew he was a violent man; what would he do?

She called him, and there was a pitiful note of distress in her voice that warned Billy he must not leave her alone. “I’m coming!” he answered, and sprang up, aroused by her need to fresh action and a semblance of cheer. “You can’t shake me, you see.” He ran up the steps toward her.

“I’m so afraid when you are not near me, Billy.” Her voice trembled.

“I couldn’t find our basket. I guess Mumps or some of them thought I had forgotten it, and took it along.”

A sudden gust shook the trees above them, and

the noise coming so unexpectedly on the dead quiet of the cloudy night, startled them.

"It's going to rain; and you're shivering, too," he added as he took her outstretched hand at the top of the steps. "The first thing to do is to make a fire."

"Can you? Have you any matches?"

"No, but I guess there will be some coals under the ashes."

They went down and raked over the fireplace, but the boys had obeyed the rules only too well; every vestige of live coal was gone.

For a minute they stood speechless, looking out over the dark and angry water. There seemed to Erminie absolutely nothing further to be done. She was worn and faint, and with difficulty restrained her tears.

"There's nothing for it but to try to make a fire camp fashion. It will be tough work, even if it doesn't rain."

As if in answer to this last, another gust swept through the trees, louder than the first.

"Erminie, you're just all right. You've never once hinted that I was the boss slob to get you into this."

"Why, Billy, I wouldn't think of such a thing. I saw as plain as you that half-past ten was the leaving hour. It's the fault of the steamer people; or— Are you sure your watch is right?"

"Yes. It's never failed yet. My brother Hal said it was guaranteed. He gave it to me. It hasn't varied a minute in two months. But this isn't work. You go back and cuddle as close in that corner as you can, little girl, and try to keep warm, while I see what I can do with my jack knife. Here's a time when a fellow that smokes has the advantage."

"I don't see why he couldn't carry matches if he didn't smoke."

"I know one chump that will after this."

But Erminie did not settle to uselessness.

"While you're trying to make a fire I'll see what was shaken out of the tablecloth. I saw them hold it over this corner; and if we could find a roll or a bit of meat,—you wouldn't mind eating scraps just about now, would you, Billy?"

The cheer that came into her tone with the prospect of something to do heartened Billy as much as herself. "Mind? I could eat the shell

right off the eggs. You're a bright kid, you are, all right."

"Oh, I'm sure it will be something better than egg-shells."

"Go to it. You may find a course dinner there in the grass, or at least the nice brown tint on one of Bess Carter's biscuits."

She laughed, which pleased him; and he went to a spot in the path where he remembered to have stubbed his toe on a projecting rock, intending to get it for a flint. But he had barely found it when she called to him.

"Billy! Billy! I've found a match-box with one match in it."

"Bully! We're saved!" He was by her side in a second.

"But *one* match,—it's—"

"It's as good as ten."

He was woodsman enough to succeed with his fire very quickly.

"How did you come to be so clever, Billy?"

She watched him intently as he prepared his gathered paper, twigs, bits of bark, and boughs; and struck his precious match within the shelter of his coat.

Soon a crackling blaze cheered and warmed

them. And when Erminie found some sandwiches and a few bits of ham thrown away in its wrappings of oiled paper, they felt as if a second feast had been like manna dropped from heaven to save them. The moon broke through the clouds for a minute, and Billy, rummaging in the grass, found the discarded coffee sack.

“Good enough! Hot coffee in five minutes!” he called softly. Without realizing it they had not spoken really aloud. Unconsciously they felt and acted as if a thousand sentient, invisible beings surrounded them, hearing and seeing their every word and move.

Billy found a lard pail, one among the many thrown away, washed it, saw it did not leak, and put the coffee to boil a second time. When a few minutes later they drank it, without sugar or cream, they thought it better than any coffee they had ever tasted before.

With hunger banished and the cheer of the warm fire, the situation seemed less direful; and they sat with feet to the embers and talked more calmly.

“Don’t you think a steamer will be along early in the morning, Billy?”

"I don't know the Sunday schedule very well. I think they stop here only for picnic parties; but I shall tie my handkerchief to the signal pole; maybe she'll see it out there if she has a regular run to town."

"There'll be the Sunday picnics! But we don't want—we must not be seen by—by anybody here."

The tone of desperation told him that she had waked to the fact that had troubled him ever since he knew they were left,—what might be said when their plight became known.

"It's lucky to-morrow's Sunday; it need n't be known at school," he comforted.

"How can it be helped?"

"If we can't get a steamer in the early morning you can hide in the brush by the wharf till the boat discharges her passengers; and when they are climbing the hill, you step into the path and head for the steamer. No one will know that you are not one of them, and the steamer people will think you came only for the boat ride, or—oh, they won't notice you any way."

"But the picnickers, Billy; they'll know I don't belong—"

"Sure they won't. At those promiscuous public picnics half are strangers to the rest."

"But you, Billy? When — ?"

"Don't worry about this kid. If we're not seen together, no one will be able to say certainly that we were here. You just 'phone my mother that I'm safe—" He stopped suddenly, his face pale with another thought which he did not voice,—her people might be seeking her, telephoning to the pupils, the police. That would mean certain disclosure of the whole situation. "Your mother will be having a bad time, I'm afraid," he said calmly.

To his consternation Erminie showed no concern. "Oh, no; ma won't worry. She'll think I've gone home with one of the girls."

"Is it—is it often—that way? Doesn't she know where you go?"

"Not to which house. I've a lot of chums, most of them out of school; and their young men—when I don't have one of my own—take us to the theatre, and to supper afterwards; and it's late then; and if I stay with the girl the young fellow doesn't have to make another trip taking me home."

Billy was silent, wondering what his mother would think of a girl who went about thus. It revealed to him a new sort of girl-life. In his boyhood town of Vina such a situation as this could not have happened; and in his city life he had known intimately only the cherished and protected daughters of careful parents.

His own evenings were full of boyish things, meetings, study, decorous calls, and work or play at home. His attendance at the theatre was rare, either in school groups or with his mother, or alone, high among the "gallery gods." He tried to put out of mind the feeling of "commonness" that Erminie's story gave him.

As if she divined his thought, she said a little plaintively, "I know lots of mothers don't think it nice for girls to run about so; but mine always told me to go ahead and have a good time while I could. When I am married, she says, all such fun will be over."

"Well, it won't be!" Billy's vehemence startled her. "But it will be a long time before we can be married; I've got to learn how to earn a living first. But it shall be a good enough living to include a little fun."

"Billy!" Surprise, gratitude, and besides these a more genuine and womanly emotion than she had ever experienced, came out in the single word. "Billy, what do you mean?"

"Mean? Why, our marriage of course. At first I felt badly because you would have to wait so long; but I don't any more. I had a good chin with my mother. You and I—we'll both of us be all the better for waiting and—learning things."

For a time Erminie sat quite still save for absently stirring the ashes with a twig. When she did speak her voice was low, with a half timid note in it that touched Billy. "How splendid you are, Billy! Too good for me. I didn't dream you thought that—that we were engaged."

"Gee! How else could I save you from Alvin Short?"

"But, Billy, that—that is not exactly a reason for—for—"

"Don't you care for me? Wasn't that what you meant that night I—I kissed you?"

"Oh, yes, I care for you, Billy; ever so much; but I never got as far as an engagement. I—"

"But that kiss—"

"Oh, I just thought you kissed me because—well—because— Oh, Billy, do you tell your mother everything?"

He caught the anxiety in her speech, and wondered if kisses of the sort he had given her were so common in her life that she could dismiss them with merely a "because." But his reply was to her question only.

"'Most everything. You see I'm just the common transparent sort,— she reads me anyway. But of course I didn't tell her about you; that's your secret. I shall not tell that till you give me leave."

She caught up his hand in both her own. "I believe you're the best boy that ever lived."

"Boy! That's just what I am! And you need a man, right now, to protect you."

"You are doing it,—doing it better than any man I ever knew."

He threw on some more wood. "I'll have to hunt fuel in a minute," he said, and stirred the fire to a blaze.

"What did your mother say that changed your mind about—about—"

"About waiting to get married?" he finished as she hesitated, and repeated much of the conversation prompted by the pinching of the geranium buds.

Erminie was silent again, and Billy waited on her mood. When she did speak her words were plaintive and halting. "Billy,— Billy, dear, it would be a very wrong thing for you to marry me. I am older, anyway, and it would wreck your life to be hampered with a—a wife when you're so young. Perhaps—perhaps there'll be—"

"Perhaps children," he finished fearlessly. "I've thought that all out; but you need me to take care of you; and after—this—this night, it's got to be."

"Oh! oh!" She cowered a little closer. "People won't know of—of this—" She put her hand over her eyes and shivered.

"They may; and—"

"It's awful!" she burst out. "Just because an accident happens, for people to talk—say bad things about us."

"They won't think it an accident, Erminie. Don't you see? I have a watch—all our set

know how foolishly I've bragged about it. We had our strict orders not to go out of sight—"

"We weren't out of sight,—not in the day-time anyway."

"And to be on hand at the ten-thirty whistle."

"But it was n't ten-thirty; it was ten."

"We can't make folks believe that."

A sudden dash of rain fell upon them and made the fire sputter.

"Gee!" Billy sprang up and threw on the last of the wood, arranging it to cover the heart of the fire from the rain. "Get under shelter, quick! We're in for a heavy shower."

She stood, but did not move away. "Aren't you coming too?"

"No. I must keep up the fire. Go and get under the table; that will be more sheltered. Here! Tie my handkerchief around your neck."

There was a new insistence in his words. She obeyed as a little child, and he hastened to the fringing woods. He remembered where he had seen a fallen tree, and a lot of loose bark, and chips that might have been hewn from the rough beams that supported the floor of the pavilion.

But he did not touch any of these. Instead he whipped out his knife and began to slash at a fir that was thrashing in the rising wind. He worked fast, piling branches till he had all he could carry, when he took them to the pavilion where Erminie sat huddled on a seat.

"That won't go, kid! You've got to obey orders. Here!"

He threw down the branches and began to strip off the soft tips.

"Let me help you, Billy." She set at it, glad of action.

"There!" He piled them under the table, spread them smoothly, and stood back. "In with you! I'll have to spread the covers. You can't do it for yourself,—not in this boarding house."

She was not deceived by his jocularities, but something compelled her to submit without words. She lay down in the sweet-smelling litter, and he covered her thick with the boughs.

"Sorry my blankets are so heavy, but they're the best the house affords."

"But where is your—what will you do, Billy? You must be awfully tired."

"I'd be a nice lad to go to sleep now, wouldn't I? The fire must be kept up, the wolves scared away; bears, too, and—"

"Oh, Billy, don't!" Her self-control broke, and she began to cry.

"Say! Kid! If you do that I'll run away! I'll jump into the drink! I can fight a bear, but I can't stand salt water—not that sort!"

He reached down, felt for her face, and patted her cheek. "You've been as plucky as— Do you know, I really can't—"

What in Cain was the matter with him? Would he snivel too? Right there! Before her? He scorned himself silently, not knowing that the situation and her pitiful tears were enough to break an older and calmer fellow than he was.

"There, Billy! Good boy! I'm all right now. I won't cry another tear. Why should I? I have the best, the bravest—"

"Cut it out! I'm the fool that got you left."

He ran off with her half laughing challenge to fate ringing in his ears. "Billy, I almost don't care. It's awfully grand to see any one prove all to the good the way you do."

Back to the chips and the bark he hurried, and had hard work to nurse his fire in the rain. Only by a constant piling of the dried fir branches that he found around the prostrate tree did he defy the shower,—which was harder now,—and keep the blaze going till it passed. When at last the clouds broke and the moon appeared it was behind the hill, leaving the little clearing in the shadow; but a faint tinge of lighter gray in the east heralded the dawn.

Worn with anxiety more than with effort, Billy dragged some dryer limbs from under the tree, finding them by feeling rather than by sight, as indeed he had done nearly everything that night. After banking his fire high with bark, he shook his wet cap and put it to dry, threw open his wet coat to the heat, and prepared to watch out the rest of the short night.

Soon an irresistible drowsiness overtook him. He fought desperately, not wishing to stir about lest he should keep Erminie awake. In the midst of a moment that was perilously near unconsciousness, she called:

“The signal, Billy! You forgot it. Here’s the handkerchief.”

“Gee whiz!” He sprang up and went to her. “My forgettery deserves a medal. You should be proud to—”

“Stop calling yourself names, my—”

“It’s mean to take it,” he interrupted, “but I have nothing else.”

“I don’t need it. I am as warm as a kitten in a feather pillow. It was a shame to wake you.”

“Wake! Do you think I’d sleep when—” He stopped, recalling how near he had come to the Land of Nod.

“But you must,—a little anyway. I’m not afraid any more. She reached the handkerchief up to him, and he took it, holding and patting her hand a second before he went on. “Good girl! You make a jolly fine pal all right. I’ll bank on you.”

With those words still on his lips as he ran down the path to the wharf, suddenly before him rose the face of May Nell. Something tugged at him, gave him a queer feeling that he could not understand. He wished Erminie’s mother had been like Mrs. Smith, that Erminie might know all the beautiful things May Nell

knew, might look out on life with May Nell's clear, loving vision of the soul of things.

Even as he thought, and chided himself for it, while he fixed the tiny, fluttering signal, a rosy light in the east told him the night was going, and deliverance near.

Another dilemma presented itself—suppose a steamer should answer his signal, what would the crew, the scattering passengers, think if Erminie came aboard alone at that early hour? Could she do it and not cause comment? A story for the papers perhaps?

With this in mind he ran back, thinking to ask her; but no words greeted his noisy steps, and he knew she must be asleep at last. He threw himself on the ground before the ash-covered embers and in five minutes he also was lost to his troubles.

He had taken the precaution to face the east in such a way that the sun, surmounting some tall firs, would waken him as nearly as he could guess at about six o'clock. As the first ray struck into his eye he started up to find it nearer seven, though but for his watch and the dancing, diamond-tipped ripples in the track of the

morning sun, he would have declared he had not slept five minutes.

"Half an hour for breakfast!" he called cheerily. Erminie answered, and soon came down to him.

At once Billy told her his latest worry, and asked her opinion.

"I believe I'd better risk it. If the captain says anything, I'll tell him I got left. It will be about nine when I get home, and people I know won't be out so early."

"Then we'll have another dish of manna, and—"

A whistle interrupted Billy.

"There she is now! What's got into my watch? That's been the joker all the time."

"Do you suppose she'll stop, Billy?" Erminie had already started down the hill.

"You'll have to run for it. Got any money?" While he spoke he thrust a dollar in her hand and she flew down the path out of his sight.

He heard the signal to stop, heard the mate cry "All aboard!" as usual before the gang plank was lowered, and after a moment heard the vessel puff her way out on her course again.

When he was certain that Erminie was off he realized, as not before, his great fatigue. A search by morning light revealed many toothsome bits of picnic dainties in the high, clean grass, which he gathered, an egg in an unbroken shell, some butter in a covered jelly glass, and a bun which he toasted by the coals.

They did not taste very good. In spite of sunshine he was depressed. The night had revealed Erminie in a way that almost repelled him at the time; but now that she was gone she seemed nearer and dearer than ever before.

After eating, and raking out the fire, he carefully removed all traces of Erminie's bed to a nook well hidden in the brush, and threw himself down on it to rest. He did not expect to sleep,—he had too much that was exciting to think of; but hardly had he touched his bed of fir when Morpheus claimed him. He heard nothing till the advent of noisy picnickers arriving on the four o'clock steamer, when he jumped up, drowsy still, skirted the park carefully, and barely made the steamer in time.

At half past five, dishevelled and haggard, he walked into his mother's room.

CHAPTER VII

“DO YOUR BEST AND THEN — WHISTLE ”

BILLY! My son!” Mrs. Bennett started forward as he opened her door, and threw her arms around his neck.

“Did she—did a girl telephone you that I was all right, mother?”

“Yes. This morning. She said you were detained, but did not tell me where or why.”

“What else did she say?”

“Nothing, but hung up the receiver before I could ask any questions. Very odd, I thought; certainly not courteous.”

“Mother, don’t judge her too quickly. A girl who has to stay all night out in the woods with a chap like me, is not likely to be very proud of telling it around.”

“Why, William Bennett!”

Billy was as much astonished to see his mother turn pale as he was to hear in that stern tone his

full name. "Sit down, marms. It's all right for me, but pretty rocky for her."

Then he told her the whole story, except that he did not divulge Erminie's name, nor their relation to each other.

For a long time they were silent, his mother strangely serious and sad, it seemed to Billy. At length she turned to him, took both his hands in hers, and looked steadily in his eyes, but still did not speak.

He bore the scrutiny well though it made him uncomfortable. "Don't look like that, mother. What could we have done different or better than we did?"

She kissed him on the cheek and he felt her closer clasp. "Nothing, my boy. It was one of those trying situations one cannot foresee. But it is serious. Do you realize what it will entail upon this girl if evil-speaking people learn the story?"

"Gee! That's what I've been thinking of all night. But I don't see how any one is to know about it."

"If she is questioned she will have to tell more than one falsehood to keep people from

knowing some one was with her; and lies always defeat themselves."

"Well, mother, if it comes to the worst I shall stand by her."

"Of course, if you can; but whatever you say will only harm her. Your silence is the best thing you can give her."

"I can marry her."

If Billy had shot at his mother he could have astonished her hardly more.

"Billy! You're only a little boy!" she gasped with her first recovered breath.

"Oh, not to-day, but after a while. And meantime, while I'm growing old enough and earning something, I can lick any fool that speaks against her."

In a long life of many trials Mrs. Bennett had learned self-control; also that many worries are best left alone for a time before attacking them. She rose and stood behind Billy's chair, stroking his soft, abundant hair. "Boy, put such thoughts out of your mind. They are unsuited to you. Whatever is just and right, whatever is manly and needed by this girl from you, that of course you must do. But time will show what

that may be. In the meantime you must go on as usual, doing the duty of each day. Just now that means a bath, supper, your lessons, and bed."

Again she kissed him, drew her hand caressingly across his forehead, and left the room. And to Billy's keen ear it seemed as if her step in a moment had become the slow, shuffling tread of an old woman.

As the evening passed, his depression grew. He found it difficult to study. The pages were meaningless. Or if he roused himself to some attention suddenly the print blurred, and he heard again the quick tempest of the night before surging through the trees, or Erminie's pitiful, "I'm so afraid, Billy!"

And his mother's step, as she left the room, haunted him. What had made her walk like that? He began to suspect the case was worse than he had thought if it could hurt her so. "Betsey, Betsey! Why didn't you get a move on?" he whispered whimsically. It was years since he had thought of his boyish name for his conscience. Yet reviewing the night's experience he could find little blame for himself.

His large attic room, usually so cheery and so much to his wish, was full of sounds that to his overwrought mind seemed to come from unseen beings. He listened for a time, then switched on the light; and seeing only the familiar scene, turned it off again, impatient with himself, ashamed. He need not have been so. He was neither a coward nor a hyper-sensitive; it was his own high-strung imagination that peopled the darkness with jeering shapes.

But finally he slept. And with the morning youth asserted itself, and he went off to school with new courage to meet whatever might come.

That proved to be nothing unusual. Erminie was there, pale and quiet, but otherwise quite herself. By a subtle understanding that needed no explaining they kept apart. No one seemed to notice them except Jim; at noon he watched Erminie's every move. At first Billy thought himself over-suspicious; but once when he caught a gleam in Jim's eye, saw the covert smile on his lips, Billy knew something malicious was brewing; believed that the Kid possessed their secret and only waited his own time to use it—no one could foretell how.

Billy was not very light of heart when he went around after school to Mr. Smith's town office, and found Dr. Carter there. He wished to talk with Mr. Smith alone, to ask him for employment, for something to do that would be worth good wages at once. He was not skilled of course, but he was strong and quick, able to do a man's work at hard labor; and with a boy's optimism he knew he could learn, "Make good from the start."

Dr. Carter's genial face and excellent stories, even though Billy knew he had no better friend anywhere, were not welcome to him now. He did not know just how to proceed. He wondered if the two were considering business; though it must be so, since Mr. Smith was a very busy man, and it was still in business hours. And yet they were laughing heartily and had admitted Billy at once.

"Well, what can I do for you, Billy?" Mr. Smith asked cordially. "Jove! It's time we called you 'Mr. Bennett,' you're such a giant." Mr. Smith was a short, stout man, and when he stood beside Billy he had to lift his face to look into the boy's eyes.

The doctor greeted Billy in his quiet, friendly way; and with his firm hand-clasp a quick memory came to Billy of the day, so long ago, when he had found the counterfeiter, and raced to town on his wheel with his secret, not knowing how to tell it till he met the doctor. Again he saw himself, coatless, torn, dusty, freckled, his hair wet and "plastered," following the immaculate doctor into the grand dining room of the new hotel. After that came the memory of telling his story to the sheriff, and of that awful trip when he led the sheriff and posse up the mountain, through the edge of the forest fire to the counterfeiters' den. And after that, the rescue of May Nell—

These pictures flashed through his mind during the instant he was returning the doctor's greeting; and on recalling himself he felt as if he were coming back from a long journey, felt unpardonably abrupt when he tried to state his business to Mr. Smith.

"I came to—I'd like—"

"You'd like a private interview? Is that it?" Mr. Smith prompted.

"The boy's after a job. Don't give it to him,

Mr. Smith. He'd better play through his vacation; he works hard enough at school to deserve it." The doctor smiled and rose to go; and Billy wondered how it was that the doctor could "beat a chap's own thinker to it." He did not know that the keen, trained sense that enables a skilled physician to read the hidden meaning of every line and tint and pulse of the body, could also reveal to him the meanings the mind writes into voice and eye.

As soon as he had gone Mr. Smith motioned Billy to a seat and listened with no interruption, while the boy told his errand. For a time after he had finished, the man of affairs continued to draw meaningless designs on the blotter, till Billy grew first hot, then cold, and wished himself away.

"What can you do?"

"I—I don't know. Isn't there a lot of just common work to do on your railroad that you're building over to Tum-wah? I surely can do digging; I am strong."

"Yes, there is plenty of digging," Mr. Smith said absently, and again lapsed into silence.

"Does your mother know you're doing this?"

he questioned so suddenly at last that Billy jumped.

"She doesn't know I'm here to-day, but she knows that I intend to work this summer,—perhaps right along."

"Do you intend to dig in the dirt for a living?"

The stern words stung Billy as a whiplash. "No, sir. I hope to do something better—I *shall* do something better after a while," he added with an energy that pleased Mr. Smith.

"Have you decided what you will make your life work?"

"I've thought of—" He was about to say journalism but something about this fearless, successful man made the boy feel young and very ignorant. "I had thought of trying to get on a newspaper."

"Nothing in it! You'll smell of a grindstone all your life, and be a slave besides."

"Slave?" Billy repeated anxiously.

"Yes. The newspaper business is no longer an outlet for individual character. It's just a machine where each man is a cog, and writes what he is told, no matter what he believes. If

his stuff is good the paper gets the credit; if it isn't he is fired."

Billy made no reply to this, but after a moment asked, "Would not that be the way with anything I tried at first?"

"Yes, boy, it would." There was an unexpected kindness in his tone. He rose and walked once or twice across the richly furnished office, when he stopped and looked down upon Billy, who sat with every muscle tense, his hands unconsciously gripping the chair arms.

"Billy, ever since the day you prevented that devil from kidnapping May Nell, I've had you in mind. I've no son of my own; but if I had, I'd be glad if he was as much of a man as you've always shown yourself."

Again he walked the length of the room and back. "You know I wanted to educate you; but your mother was right, wiser than I. Now I'm not so sure I'm going to do this thing you've asked of me. If you need money to tide you through your school, Billy, I shall be more than glad to advance it. No amount of money will square what your family has done for mine. But—I'm blamed if I'm going to help you ruin

your future. What you need now is school, and the university; a year or two of running about the country to see what sort of a nation you belong to; and then you'll be fit to settle in some business where you'll have men digging for you. That's what I want you to do, Billy."

The boy could not speak. This was what he had looked forward to, had planned to do, even if he had to earn his way and take years in doing it. But Erminie's coming into his life had changed everything. Such dreams must be abandoned for a different and harder future.

At last he stood, and looked into Mr. Smith's face steadily, but with a disappointment in his determined eyes that touched the man. "There are reasons,—reasons that I am not at liberty to mention, Mr. Smith, why I must go to work as soon as school closes; and probably I shall not be able to go back. If you had anything I could do I would rather work for you than for any one else. I'd try very hard, sir." He hesitated an instant, but not long enough for the other to speak. "But since you don't approve I must look farther." He stepped toward the door.

"Here! Sit down! If you're bound to make

a fool of yourself about work it might as well be where I can hold you down to it till you're sick of it, and come to your senses." Mr. Smith's eyes twinkled, and his voice was softer than his words. "You needn't hunt any other boss. I'll have a job for you when you come for it. How soon will that be?"

"School closes on the twenty-third of June; I'll be ready the morning of the twenty-fourth."

"That's Saturday. I won't take any fellow from school till he's had a vacation; come Monday, the twenty-sixth." He laughed at his own joke, and opened the door, and Billy knew the interview was ended, yet he tried to stammer his thanks.

"I'm very—I'm—"

"Get out with you! I won't be thanked for helping you to ruin yourself!" Mr. Smith blustered, and shut the door on Billy.

Ruin himself! The words roused a sudden anger. He'd show them! This course that he was taking was not his own choice; circumstances forced it on him. It was the right thing to do, and right never ruined any one. Or if it did— He looked up as he walked and saw a

lineman high among the deadly light wires, held only by belt and spurs, busily splicing wires and whistling at his work.

“That’s it,” Billy thought. “Do what I have to do as well and carefully as I can, and then—whistle.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE POTATO ROAST

A FEW nights later came the rally of the Progressives before their election for playground officers. Since the episode of the stilts Hector had taken a prominent part in playground affairs, and some thought it was hurting his candidacy for president of the student body, — that it was too small a matter for high-school students to consider. But he held to his course.

The election for president was due the next week. Jim had decided on the next afternoon, Friday, for Walter Buckman's last demonstration. Hector's party had held their preëlection meeting also; but this playground rally would be one more opportunity to test Hector's strength.

The benches were arranged on the ball ground this time, and Billy, who was manager, saw that everything was ready before he went home for dinner. When he came again he found Mumps,

Redtop, and the squad of freshmen left on guard, looking as if there had been things doing.

"It's good the cop's coming to-night; the Kid's crowd intend to act up," Mumps said as Billy came up.

"What makes you think so?"

"They tried to beat us out of the benches."

"How did you stop it? I see they haven't been touched."

"Mumps is the keen kid," Redtop commended; "he told 'em we had those benches from the supervisor and could keep them here till to-morrow morning; and that we had a cop to see that no one interfered with them."

"Bully for you, Mumps!"

"Redtop told the Kid that if they get busy hoodooing the Progressives that's all we ask; it will be the prettiest sort of a finish for the Kid and Buckman."

"Do you think that fixes them?"

"Yes, unless — They have some plan hatching to beat Hector that we can't find out. The election's no walk-over for Hector; I can tell you that."

Billy noticed that the Buckman boys were

rather quiet, standing about in small groups on the edge of the crowd; and also that whenever he went near them the talking suddenly stopped; and once he caught a significant lifting of the brow and a sneering smile.

There were many people already on the ground besides school children, some walking about in the waning sunlight. Even at half-past eight the torches seemed a joke this late May evening.

But the band was no joke. It was the band of the Chetwoot (black bear) Troop of Scouts, the newsboys' troop, and Mr. Streeter's pride. Their uniform was handsome, their marching excellent, and their music remarkable considering they had been playing together less than a year. Under the guidance of the best teacher Mr. Streeter could hire for them, and with an enthusiasm that warmed his heart, the little chaps worked together night after night; and now, when they came up the street, and filed into their places, proud of being invited to play before such a large audience, he led the clapping, which lasted till long after the boys were seated.

Billy made a good chairman. Everything

went off in orderly fashion. The girls were represented by two short speeches in which the importance of good manners on the playground was emphasized; the band played several selections; Hector spoke convincingly of the responsibility of the Fifth Avenue High for the good name of the playground, and Reginald Steele won the fathers and mothers present by telling of Mr. Streeter's Good Citizens' Clubs, and how their work should dovetail with all that the Progressives were working for in their proposed playground government.

Billy expected some demonstration from Jim and his followers, but none came; and the meeting was dismissed after band and audience had joined in "America."

The crowning triumph was a surprise; and provided by the girls. It was a potato roast on a vacant lot across the street from the playground. Every one present was invited, the parents being especially urged to join the feast.

The bonfire made both light and cheer that were welcome in the cool evening; and the girls with very rosy faces poked the ashes with long sticks and rolled out bushels and bushels of hot

potatoes. They had thoughtfully graded them as to size, so that the smaller ones were served first, though all had as many as they could eat. Salt, butter, and sliced ham, with pickles for a relish, made a high mark for evening outdoor fun.

The surprise was complete. Even the opposition could find no chance to gibe.

"The girls take the cake but we get the potato!" shouted Walter Buckman. "Three cheers for the potato roast!" he proposed with a heartiness that showed him an adroit politician. They were given with vigor. And the band played again, and they dispersed.

Billy felt well pleased with the evening, till at the very last of the frolic, when he stepped into the edge of the crowd, he caught a low sentence spoken with incautious clearness. "Oh, yes, they are hollering to-night, but we've got the jump on them. The Kid is laying low."

The words troubled him all the way home. And Erminie had not been there as he had hoped. He did not agree with her that she should keep aloof from the school activities; it was like acknowledging a wrong that did not exist.

But he was tired, and too young and normal to lie awake long over any anxieties—save those “Betsey kicked in for,” and he “hit the hay with eyes already shut,” he told his mother the next morning.

CHAPTER IX

FACE TO THE SKY

THE next evening Billy was busy with preparations for starting at six o'clock in the morning on the scout for which he was patrol leader. Although it would last only two days he had been a little uncertain about going, since the end of the school year with its many duties and activities was so near; but the day before he had learned that he would have to take but one examination, his high standing excusing him from the other "exams." And now that he would not be able to take any of the long, summer scouts, he could not resist this last chance for the tramps he loved.

A little before nine over the telephone came Bess's voice.

"Hello, Queen of Sheba! That was a great gift you brought us last night from your domain in the south."

"I only planned it; and like the queen of old, I didn't do it for nothing; I crave a boon."

"Say on. I'm no Solomon, but you shall have your desire if I can grant it." Billy laughed and waved an imaginary sceptre, forgetting that Bess could not see him.

"It's not so difficult. May Nell has just telephoned that two of her classmates arrived before dinner time on their way East, and she wants you and me to come over."

"Gee whiz! It's late to spring your command."

"Not five seconds since I received mine. They've been motoring all the evening."

"And I'm—not—dressed to meet—"

"Billy To-morrow! When did you begin to cogitate about apparel?"

"It's different—"

"No more. The Queen commands. Come over right away, and father will set us down,—the machine is at the door. I won't be a minute."

Bess's home was only a block away, and her "minute" only five, yet in that short time Dr. Carter had a call in another direction, and the two young people had to take a trolley car. This

was an opportunity Bess had desired, and she improved it at once.

"Billy, I want you to tell me why you did n't ask May Nell to go with you to the picnic instead of Erminie."

"May Nell isn't a pupil of Fifth Avenue High."

"That makes no difference. A lot of the Juniors brought friends. For that matter what was Mumps doing there? If I had known you would n't ask her, I should have taken her."

Billy did not reply. For once Bess could not understand him, and was distressed. He was the playmate of her lifetime, the one boy comrade she had treated as frankly as a brother. But now she realized he had interests apart from hers, cared no longer for things she could share; and the knowledge hurt her.

"And then that Erminie Fisher! She's no more to be compared with May Nell than—"

"Go easy, Bess. You saw that Miss Fisher went with me, didn't you?" There was a look in his eye, a tone in his voice that chilled her, that added to her feeling of distance from him.

She glanced up almost shyly. "Then do

you wish it to be ' Mr. Bennett ' and ' Miss Carter ' after this? ”

“ Oh, piffles, Bess! You're always to the good. The reason I said that is because it makes me mad to hear every one say mean things of Erminie. She's a lot better than — ” He did not finish. An uncomfortable memory of her self-revelation during the night on the island told him why girls like Bess shunned her. But what she had said of her mother also came to him, and what he knew of her father. How could she be the sort of girl Bess was, whose parents were not only loving, but wise?

“ Well, there must be something good about her, Billy, when you like her. But I can't see how you can neglect May Nell for her.”

“ I don't neglect May Nell. But I am no J. Pierpont; I've got my living to earn. Do you suppose May Nell will want me ringing her door-bell after I don overalls and grease? ”

“ Will Erminie? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Then she's different from what I think. But anyway you won't do that. You'll do something splendid; something with your brains; or you'll

go out into the mountains or desert and juggle old lady Nature, and—”

“And she’ll beat me to it—juggling. Bess, you’ll soon be going by shy of a nod to me yourself. I’m going to work, just plain digging with no frills on it.”

“Billy!”

They were at their destination with no chance for pursuing the subject.

Billy was not usually self-conscious. Before his experience with Erminie he would have entered Mr. Smith’s elegant parlor as easily, would have met the strange girls who were larger and older than May Nell, as unabashed as if he had been reared in luxury. But now he felt out of place. He was beginning to note social differences; to realize that daughters of very rich men are reared to a luxurious scale of life; that they cannot understand poverty, or even simple comfort. He was seeing that no matter how willing they may think themselves to endure poverty with the loved man, they are totally unfit; and their failure is not their blame.

Something of this made him awkward and silent, while the four girls together with Regi-

nald Steele, Redtop, and Sis Jones, chattered and laughed and joked, till Billy began to wish he had not come.

May Nell did not know of the changes coming to him. She attributed his different attitude toward her entirely to the fact that she was too small and young to interest him. But he was her guest, and courtesy as well as pride determined her to compel him to unbend. She left the others, and on a quickly invented pretext drew him to the farther end of the large room.

"Billy, is it true, as Bess says, that you have given up your part in the Fifth Avenue High play?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Billy, why? When you wrote it, too."

"No, no! Who told you that? Three of us wrote it; that is, we thought out the stuff, and Mr. Streeter helped us put it in shape."

"But he told father the ideas were all yours, and that you were very clever."

"I guess I'll have to hand 'Pop' Streeter a nickel."

The half cynical note in Billy's laugh did not escape her keen ear; and though she could not

have told why, it hurt her. "You bad boy! He meant every word of it. Tell me about it."

"It isn't much. Just a picture of Washington life as I thought it would be if we did all the things with Nature we might do. Just imagination."

"*Just* imagination makes the whole world, Billy."

"That's what we think when we're children, but I guess when we get out with the cold facts we'll find imagination doesn't fill the dinner pail."

"Billy, imagination makes everything! It builds the world. Why, when God himself looked into the void did n't He have to imagine a world before He could speak the fiery word that created it?"

"That's — that's a pretty big thought, isn't it?" Billy answered slowly, overmastered by her eagerness.

"And, Billy, you used to believe in it so thoroughly. Don't you any more?"

"Do you?"

"Yes, yes! I'll have to die when I don't believe in it."

"Don't say that."

"But it's true, Billy Boy!" She had not called him so since the days in Vina when she was a waif and the Bennett home her refuge. The affectionate child-name touched him, bridged the distance between them.

"Oh, I don't know," he hesitated, "imagination may be a divine privilege; but for mere man,—too much dreaming makes him discontented. I think when one must earn one's bread and butter the straight fact is better."

"Boy, boy! Nothing but slavery and plodding comes of such a feeling. You're holding your head down when you should look up, face to the sky."

"I guess if one were making chairs for a living, he'd have to look down."

"I guess if he hadn't looked up he'd never have had the idea of a chair for a pattern. Oh, you're no sheep, Billy. You couldn't hold your nose to the ground! You've got to look up, or you'll die."

The others interrupted, calling for songs, little French songs that May Nell sang captivately. And after that they had college songs,

and a rollicking time. Billy joined, yet with his voice only; his thoughts were lifted to the realm his soul always reached when with May Nell.

Mr. Smith came in, bringing with him a gust of the big out-of-doors; as if his swift flight in his great motor did not stop at the door. He was a man who drew all to him. Children and dogs, men and women, rich and poor. He seemed to have a wealth of power and substance that sufficed for a cityful. And he was a providence to more of the needy than any but himself knew.

He greeted the young people breezily, unconsciously giving the feeling for the moment that their presence was the one thing needful to make him happy, and left the room taking Billy with him.

"Sorry to interrupt pleasure, my boy; but since you're determined to become a business man, you will find that pleasure has no rights that business is bound to respect. I want to speak to you."

After preliminary explanations Mr. Smith took Billy into his confidence in a remarkable way. "I have a piece of work that you may be

able to do for me, that's beyond your years. If you fail I shall not blame you,—others have failed before you. Here is the situation: That interurban line I'm building, the Washington Railway line between the city front and Tum-wah, is a small matter in itself, but it is the key to a big situation.

“We have pushed our bill through the Legislature, allowing the canal between the two big lakes, and we are going to change that little Tum-wah Valley into a great city with a payroll of thousands of men. We'll dredge the small river right to the falls, make our own power, and load our own ships,—while they clean off the barnacles in fresh water,—load them for the world's ports. In a few years the plant will be worth ten or fifteen millions.”

Billy gasped in astonishment. The narrow little valley along the Tum-wah Creek was within the city limits, yet it showed nothing now but the vegetable gardens of the Italian colony, sordid little huts, dirty children, and the rickety old electric line where dirty cars went bumping along on an elastic schedule that got people to town along in the forenoon, and home sometime

in the evening. This seemed as distant from Mr. Smith's fifteen-million dollar dream as is heaven from a very dirty earth.

Something of this Billy ventured to express.

"The only heaven we have is right here. If it isn't clean, it's up to us to make it so. And one thing sure: it will never be any bigger or any cleaner than we imagine it to be."

The boy thought of May Nell. This was off the same pattern of life as hers. As if in answer to his thought, Mr. Smith went on.

"Business is merely realized dreams; preferred stock in imagination. But it takes sweat to realize on them. And it's your sweat, boy, that I am asking. The people who own that old teetering string they call the Tum-wah Railroad are down on me because I'm paralleling them. They will give me all the trouble they can,—they've served one injunction, but it did n't stick. I have men watching them, but they suspect these men. You see they are stirring up those Italians to believe that as soon as I get my business started I will take their lands from them."

"You'll have to have them, won't you?" Billy questioned as the other paused; Billy's

vision had run forward to the teeming city Mr. Smith had prophesied.

"Surely. And those Italians will get more for their land than they can make in raising vegetables all their lives. But of course I'm not advertising that now; and the other concern is, I have reason to believe, making the Dagos think I shall steal them out of their homes. What I want of you is to keep on the lookout, let me know things before they happen. Go to work with the other laborers, run errands, keep your ears open, your mouth shut, and look as stupid as you can. Will you do it?"

"I'll try, sir. It won't be very hard, that last."

"Say! Stop that! And that 'sir' business. Who taught you that?"

"That's the way we address the Scoutmaster; and—and my father was a soldier of the Civil War."

Mr. Smith softened. "And made a record to be proud of; I've heard it from your mother. But here's the situation, Billy: You're beginning at the bottom; but if you are to be useful to me you must have a definite power of your own; you must compel. It's in you; and while you

must adopt a stolid exterior in this first job, when you come in contact with my men, when you are delivering my orders, you must charge them with enough powder of your own to make them carry. See?"

Billy thrilled with the prescience of future force. "I think I see what you mean, Mr. Smith. I shall try not to disappoint you; though—" A sudden thought of Erminie intruded itself,—what would this man of great affairs say if he knew that a wife, and the support of a home, would soon be the burden that he, a mere boy, would have to add to the difficult service Mr. Smith was asking.

"Out with it! Better thrash out all the 'ifs,' and 'thoughts' right now. But I don't allow those words a place in my vocabulary."

"Then I won't!" Billy brought out the words with a snap.

"Well said, my boy! That's the soldier's way. But remember this: While I get my business done, done at any cost,—if one man can't do it another must; yet I know when a thing proves impossible. I don't expect the impossible."

He gave Billy a reassuring clasp of the hand, and a look that determined the boy to "make good if any chap going could," and bade him good-night.

Billy did not know how long he had been away from the drawing-room till he went in and found the others going, and Bess already hatted.

"I began to think it all a dream that one Billy To-morrow brought me here this evening," she chaffed.

"No dream; he's arrived."

"Yes? So has to-morrow—almost."

Billy glanced at the clock. The chimes for eleven-thirty had already rung.

They laughed and "jollied," delaying their departure with joyous nothings. Both Bess and May Nell felt a subtle change in Billy; he was not the same boy that had entered there so shortly before.

Thus did Mr. Smith galvanize to unsuspected power all who came into his presence. Billy went home lifted, ready to meet any future.

CHAPTER X

THE SCOUT

LONG before the alarm clock buzzed the rising hour, Billy was awake. He hopped out and hurried with his dressing, watching the sunrise meanwhile with some anxiety. It seemed more golden and opalescent than usual; or was it only because it was some time since he had seen it? Such a fine beginning was apt to end in rain, he remembered a little impatiently.

He was at the meeting-place before time, as were the five other eager ones. Two days! So short a time in which to win honors! Three patrols had failed to find the flag so cunningly hidden by Scoutmaster Streeter to test the troops. The Skwis-kwises (squirrels) had tried, the Chetwoots, and Billy's troop, the Olympics. This was a joint patrol, and the honor of being its leader Billy had long coveted.

They looked quite smart when they started off, in their khaki uniforms and their scouts' hats

all at precisely the same angle with chin-straps resting jauntily on the tip of the chin. Billy carried the banner of his own troop, the design being a snowy mountain with a jagged crest, a picture of old Olympus himself; not the classic mountain, but the Sentinel of the Pacific.

Their work was definite. They were to take the trolley line to the northeast city terminal, going and coming; from there cover at least fifteen miles on foot in the two days, whether they found the flag or not. Mr. Streeter said if they could only read his plain signs they could not miss it; but so far the patrols had failed.

Besides finding the flag each was to fulfil the rule of one kind act each day; to report some fact of the woods-life not before recorded in the annals of the city troops, or some new deed; and to stop one hour on Sunday for exercises of their own devising that should take the place of church. To accomplish this most of the circumstances would have to be in their favor. Billy hoped the weather would be one.

The start included breakfast which they took at an early restaurant, that their knapsacks

might not weigh an unnecessary ounce. They set off northward from the railroad terminus, following the beautiful boulevard as long as its direction was right, then a country road for a mile or so, which they left at a given point for the trails where their real hunt began.

Billy divided the patrol into three squads, Hugh of the Skwis-kwises had Mumps from the Chetwoots for his partner; Redtop was assigned with "Bump" Parker; and Billy took Bob Brown. He was a tenderfoot. So was Hugh, though one of the cleverest and most observant of all the scouts; but he was doomed to his class till time should bring around his twelfth birthday, when he would be eligible to all the scout honors he could win.

"We'll search the trails for three hours," Billy decided, "and meet at the south end of Lake Mow-itsh on the main road." He studied his map, a copy of which each one carried. "Ten points for the first squad to arrive, and ten points for any new bird seen in the forest and rightly named."

"That's easy!" Bob exclaimed. He was a recent arrival from the Middle States.

"You won't think so after you've hiked a while; the forest is too dense for many birds, — not enough food for them."

"And now for the routes; draw straws."

Billy and Bob drew the longest route, which pleased the patrol leader. "Now's your chance to show your grit, kid; your legs are not as long as mine."

"But they're as good, I bet," Bob returned spunkily. And they separated.

The woods here were dense and heavy with rain of the night before. The fickle sun disappeared, and the stillness of the forest settled upon them. Unconsciously Billy and Bob lowered their voices, doing very little talking, for Billy's eyes and mind were on the trail intently watching for the slightest sign. At each division of the trail he searched so long and carefully that Bob was impatient.

"We'll lose all chance of winning in at the lake."

"If we find the flag that will be the biggest win of all, and I'm not going to lose one pointer if I can help it." Billy went down on his knees to look at a track.

"What did you expect to find?"

"I did n't know; but it's up to a scout to pass nothing by in the woods. Look for the arrow that points the way, you tenderfoot. It may be only a straight shaft or it may have a square at the feathered end."

"What does that mean?"

"A letter three paces from the arrow."

"What color will the arrow be?"

"Gee whiz! Did you think it would be bought from a store? Diamond-tipped, maybe? It'll be any old stick touched up with a jack knife perhaps. You've got a lot to learn, kid."

"What direction from the arrow would the letter be?"

"What do you think?"

"The way the arrow points?"

"Right— What have you found?" Billy crossed a small open spot to where the other boy was bending over two crossed sticks at the foot of a tree. "Good! You're not blind as you might be. That's luck—finding that. We're on the wrong lead."

"How do you know? Two sticks might fall that way."

“But look here! See that crooked line made of pieces of bark?”

“Yes, but that’s nothing — Why, it’s the letter ‘S.’”

“That means Mr. Streeter. Around here somewhere we’ll find more signs.”

They hunted carefully along, leaving their own records on tree or ground. Billy explained the many ways of marking the way,—smokes, wigwagging, shaking the blanket, the semaphore code, all of which are practically useless in the dense forest, where trees reach higher than could any smoke that would be safe.

“I’ve got it!” Billy shouted presently, and blew three blasts on his whistle three times repeated, to herald the finding of an arrow.

No answer.

“We’ll have to write our message in bark chips, I guess.” Billy selected one large smooth piece, placing it directly beside the path, with another small round piece on top.

“What does that say?”

“This is the trail,” Billy answered. “And this means ‘Go to the right,’” he continued, making a similar sign except that he put the small

piece at the right of the larger one, and scratched a rough "B" in the soft forest debris.

A drizzling rain had begun, and the summer forest was dark and very dreary to the plains-bred boy. "Golly! I'm glad I'm not alone. I'd be dippy in an hour."

"Why?"

"Oh, you can't tell it in words. It's like hearing and feeling things in the dark; you could swear they were there just where they could touch you; but light a match and you find every one of 'em on the hike."

"Yes, I know the feeling. You almost think these ferns will rise and strangle you. In California the forests are more open—" He stopped suddenly. "Here's a blaze!" He pushed away the ferns that almost concealed a square cut in the bark of a tree, in the centre of the bared space was a pencilled "S." "These ferns have done a good job of growing since Pop Streeter hid the flag two weeks ago. But it's his mark all right. No wonder the other boys missed it."

They pressed on, not minding the rain now that the goal seemed near; Billy's enthusiasm warmed the other boy.

"It's funny, ain't it, how a fool bit of cloth can make a fellow work? When we get it, it's worth nothing."

"Bob, I guess some of the things that seem useless are really worth the most."

"But we can't sell it for anything, we can't eat it, and it won't pay debts."

"Well, how many debts would greenbacks pay if the American flag was wiped out? And anyway those that do the biggest things seldom do get paid in money."

"Who, for instance?"

"The great artists; many of them starved in their own day, and now we pay a fortune for one piece of their work. And who pays the mothers? They do most of anybody."

Bob was thoughtful. "Ye-s; I reckon lots of mothers get slim pay."

The signs became more frequent now. They were written in broken twigs, in bunched and tied grass, and once in a more open place in piled stones. Presently the boys found themselves on the shore of Mow-itsh Lake about two miles from the rendezvous. There, in front of a great cedar, stood the notched and numbered

staff with its well-known device etched with knife and ink,—a mountain with a scout and a flag on its summit. But the flag they had searched for was gone!

“I wonder what that means!” Billy shook the water from his hat and gazed in all directions for an answer.

“Search me. I’m no more good at knowin’ things of this country than if we were in Sahara.”

Billy looked at his watch. “Half an hour to get back to the rendezvous; and then dinner.”

“Well, filling the hole in my stomach will be real pay for this hike; enough for me, whether we get any glory or not.”

Back over their way they went to the main trail, with no delays, for Billy had blazed the way carefully.

“Use your eyes, kid,” he admonished. “There are things in the woods besides trees; and to-night we’ll have a gab to see how much six pairs of eyes have been able to discover.”

They arrived to find Hugh alone, preparing to make a fire.

“Billy, I’m glad you’ve come. Now you can watch me,—see if I work right.”

"You're not going to try it by friction, are you? It will take too long."

"No, it won't. I got fire in six minutes the other day by following Mr. Seton's directions."

"That's all right if you have dry wood and the right kind; but it's been raining."

"Just the same I've found some fine cedar. You watch me."

While he drilled out the fine wood-dust Billy was busy finding dry bark fibre for tinder; and soon a tiny spark appeared, then a little glowing coal upon which they placed the bunch of fibre, fanning it with their hats till a flame answered, and soon they had a blazing fire with its cheering warmth.

"Gee! I didn't know it was easy as that." Bob was a trifle contemptuous.

"Easy!" The Fairy rose, rather quickly for a fat boy. "If you think it's easy you just try it: I've been three months learning."

"Three months?"

"Not all the time of course; but every time I could get the chance to practise. The directions in books are as good as words can tell, but there's a lot you have to see with your eyes that can't be told."

"Six minutes — that's fair time. Oh, Billy! The flag-staff! Where did you find it? Where's the rest of it?"

"That's what we want to know; this is all we found. Did you get anything?"

"This." Hugh took from his pocket a much worn shoe the size to fit a child of seven or eight.

"Heavens! A lost kid!"

"A little girl, too."

"How do you know that, Fairy?"

"See the little buckle business? Boys don't wear that sort."

"Where is Mumps?"

Billy scowled. "That's against the rules, you two being separated."

"We aren't. He's in earshot." Hugh sent a musical "hoo-hoo" into the distance, which was immediately answered.

"Is there water so near?" Bob questioned incredulously, while Hugh went on with his calls, singly, in groups, and by spaces.

"Mumps has four fish,—bass."

"Well, how in jiminy do you know that?"

"Oh, it's a little set of signals we decided before he set off."

"Trust the Fairy for talking by signal; he's a cracker-jack at that," Billy explained.

Sydney came up with the fish cleaned for broiling; and presently the others came in. It had stopped raining, and the sun though not shining still warmed and brightened the air.

Their luncheon was a quick affair of coffee, fish, and bread and butter; for they were too excited over the "finds" to take much time for eating. If there was a child lost what better "kind act" could they do than to search for her? Redtop and Bump had passed a farmhouse some distance back, which was the only hint of human life any of them had seen.

Billy decided to start immediately, and keep together till they came to the house. They would make that headquarters, to which any one finding any trace of the child should report.

"Perhaps there is no lost child; maybe the shoe was just thrown away," Bump ventured.

"Who would carry a shoe into a forest to throw it away?" Redtop jeered.

"A dog might," Billy returned, and the others laughed at Redtop.

They broke camp and hurried on, spurred by

the apparent seriousness of the situation. The quest of the flag lost all zest beside the mere possibility of human life in danger.

Half a mile on, or more, they came to a comfortable-looking house where a woman was washing on the back porch. To their question she shook her head. No child was missing. She had one, and she had gone home from school the night before with her cousin to stay over Sunday. But when Hugh showed her the little shoe she caught at it and turned pale.

"That's hers. Where did you find it?"

Hugh told her, and she became hysterical with fear. The men of the place were away on business, and the boys had to plan their search without help. Billy managed to learn from the excited mother the name of the cousin's family and the direction of their ranch, where he sent Redtop and Bump to find out if the little girl had left, and when; and to arouse the few neighbors to the hunt.

Billy took the other three with him and set out to the spot where Fairy had found the shoe. This was near the lake shore; and as they noted the steep banks and how the green things grew

close down and hung into the water, they chilled with apprehension.

Carefully they worked through the afternoon, peering into every opening, following every slightest path, calling every few minutes that they might not lose one another, and with the added hope that a little voice might answer.

Later they came upon the neighbors and learned that the child had left the cousin's home early that morning unseen by any one. There were not many hunters, less than a dozen, including two or three school-boys. Three or four small ranches were all the settlements on that side of the lake; the few children rowed across the narrow inlet to the school on the other side.

A fear that the scouts had not voiced was yet present in every heart,—the wild creatures, cats and bears. Billy asked of this, under his breath that the smaller boys might not hear. The answer was reassuring. There was such a fullness of wild young growth that animals would not be hungry, and a little thing that did not attack them was comparatively safe.

The men had taken out several dogs; but they were untrained, and the rain had washed away

what scent there might have been. They did nothing but start up small game and go baying off on their own quest.

Till nearly dark they all beat the woods but with no success. The boys were worn. The men believed the search useless and discussed among themselves the advisability of dragging the lake. However when dark fell they ate hastily of food brought to them by some of the women, and set out again with lanterns into the woods.

Billy was anxious. He was responsible for getting his scouts home not only safe but in good order; and he believed that to continue the hunt without rest would utterly exhaust them. Though his own desire was to push on, and on, through the night and the awful forest till it was compelled to give up its secret, he ordered them to make camp.

CHAPTER XI

“WHOSE GLORY WAS REDRESSING HUMAN
WRONG”

BILLY kept every one busy till an excellent meal was ready. It would surprise those unaccustomed to camping to know that they had hot potatoes, broiled bacon, coffee, and hot bannocks — “sinkers,” the boys called them. Yet they had neither kettles nor dishes, except one aluminum pail, and each scout had his collapsible cup.

The potatoes were roasted in the ashes, the bannocks were mixed in the pail, patted into thin, wafer-like biscuits, spread on a clean board Billy had begged at the farmhouse, and put to bake before the fire. The pail was then washed and used for the coffee. The bacon was toasted, each man for himself, his slice pinched in the split end of a green stick.

Butter, jam, crackers, and canned milk added the “class” to the meal, for which Billy care-

fully measured out the rations, that they might not encroach upon to-morrow's supplies, for there would be no time for fishing: a more serious business claimed them.

Around the camp-fire they sat a while, toasting and drying, for the night was damp and chilly. Billy insisted on some speech, song, or story from each one, knowing that would help to banish the gloom. He called for opinions or stories regarding the Scouts' motto, "Be prepared," showing how it might become more of a talisman to them, how it could become a continual incentive to effort.

"You never know when knowledge is going to come handy," Redtop said. "That reminds me of a story of the desert country over east of the mountains, where the ranches are fenced with barbed wire. They run their telephones by means of them now; but some years back before any one had thought of that, some miscreants planned to rob a place, and cut the telephone wires that their escape might be easy. A bright boy discovered the cut, suspected some deviltry was up, and connected up the wires by tying the cut ends to the fence. The robbers did not dis-

cover the trap, and when they went to loot the house they met the police, and were caught."

"A good story," Billy declared; "I wonder how that boy saved himself a shock?"

"Rubber would do it," Redtop answered; "and glass, though that would be hard to manage."

"The shock from telephone wires wouldn't be much," Mumps said.

Billy called for a count of things each had noticed in the woods that day, Redtop to keep the count, and was pleased when Hugh outdid all in original observation.

"Some of those things have never been reported in any book that I ever read," Bump declared. "You'll make a boss scout, Fairy. I never can get the hang of making fire the way you do."

"If I live long enough," Hugh gloomed; "I'm big as sixteen and not twelve yet; just a baby."

"No matter, kid. Put your thinker to something else. Who's trying for the city flag design? September will be here before you know it."

"Have you done anything, Billy?"

"I've an idea coming, but I haven't chased it down to paper yet."

"Are you going to try, Redtop?" Hugh's thin little voice finished in a low rumble that made the rest laugh.

"Me? I couldn't draw a flag-pole that anybody'd recognize unless it was labelled."

Billy tried hard to keep the talk brisk, yet his own mind wandered. He was thinking unusual thoughts. Something in the lush fragrant woods, in the silence and the leaping flames,—or was it the feeling that other denizens might be prowling near?—recalled "The Idyls of the King," that king

"Whose glory was redressing human wrong."

All his boyhood Billy had wished he might have lived in the olden days of chivalry, when men gave their lives for the succor of the weak and wronged. The glitter and splendor of court and tournament described in Tennyson's ringing, singing lines, thrilled him; stirred a passion that he hid within the silence of his own heart, since he found few that understood the feeling. Hugh

and May Nell were the only ones of his friends who felt as he did about the ideals of chivalry. Erminie either looked at him in wonder or laughed at him for a visionary.

But to-night the world-old stories of high adventure, where all was risked for love of humanity, came to him with new force, culminating in a sudden vision of what the tragedy on Calvary meant. There could have been no good deed done in the past that was not possible to-day; and perhaps this very quest for the little child was as worthy as the romantic deeds of Arthur's knights.

Suddenly Billy straightened, and began to tell the story of that famed Round Table where sat the knights of the king, Launcelot, Sir Percivale; Merlin, the Magician, and his evil fate, Vivien. He told of the pitiful Elaine, the beautiful queen, and how she wrecked Arthur's court, and of Sir Galahad and his search for the Holy Grail.

At first the boys were not interested; but Billy's voice deepened with earnestness; and the fire declined, leaving only its glowing heart changing, gleaming, and paling like a monster opal, while

the silent forest drew closer, seemed to reach down and clasp them, till almost they felt themselves transported to those

“Great tracts of wilderness
Wherein the beast was ever more and more,
But man was less and less till Arthur came.”

“Fellows, every age needs its King Arthur and a Round Table of knights who think more of redressing human wrong and abating human suffering than they think of their own bodies and meat and drink. That is what our Congress at Washington should be. I wish it might become the fashion to go to Congress for what men could put into the nation, not for what they can get out of it.”

He rose and reached his hand up toward the stars, showing bright in the small open space above the tall trees. “Think of it! Just to do nothing but feed oneself, earn, spend, sleep, and die,—an ox does that. Yet most of us think that if we do that and keep out of jail we do enough; we are men.”

“Just what are you driving at, Billy?” Bump yawned.

Billy, out of patience, went over and shook

him. "Driving at? I'm thinking of the chances I waste every day while I moon over the great things men *used* to do: that if we can only find that child and I can get back to work, I'll dig! I'll 'be prepared' even if my sword is a shovel instead of Excalibur. I'm going to —"

He stopped abruptly. "It's time to turn in, boys," he said quietly, turning away, ashamed of having shown his emotion.

Rubber blankets over boughs were all "to the good." They spent little time in chaff or "rough-house," and in a few minutes all but Billy were asleep. He could not rest. The day had been too exciting to give room to any of his own affairs; but now Erminie intruded.

Why had she not come out the night of the playground rally? He knew her contention that she should keep out of sight, yet she had almost promised. Had her father learned of their night on the island? He had thrashed this over before, but in each quiet moment the question came again insistently. He tossed and turned wondering that he should notice that the bed was hard, that his blanket was short, that the others snored; usually these things were as nothing.

But at last he slept.

They were astir at five o'clock, and breakfast was soon over, when they were off again. They stopped first at the farmhouse to hear the latest word, which was not encouraging. The men had been out all night and found no trace; now they were starting for the lake where nearly all felt the search would end.

Not Billy. He decided that, if the lake proved the child's fate, it mattered little when she was found. Yet she might be in the forest; and with the endorsement of the others he set about a still more careful hunt in the woods.

Through the forenoon, which was clear and warm, they travelled by twos, taking many by-paths they had neglected the day before. The going was hard, and their faces were scratched by thorn and brier. They climbed logs and delved into many a hidden hole where the child never would have thought of going, unless she had crept there in fear. Billy kept the details well abreast of one another by whistles and calls, and as fast as possible made their general direction toward home, for soon they must give up the search and be on their way.

Near noon a shout from Bob who was following up one side of a huge fallen tree halted Billy on the other side. "I've found the flag!"

Billy ran around the towering root of the trunk. It was true, but such a flag! Creased, torn, and soiled, it was hardly recognizable. Where it lay, the ferns and wild grasses were trampled as if some light thing had walked about, perhaps lain there.

A whistle said imperatively "Come!" and Billy, marking the spot and the way, followed the call to find Mumps and Hugh excited over a little black stocking. That, too, was torn; and a dark spot on it showed where briers had pierced the tender skin

"We're warm!" Billy exclaimed. "We'll find her near here, or—" He did not finish; but each knew what Billy did not voice. They forgot their own fatigue; their scratched hands and weary feet. A fresh strength invaded them as a tide from some unknown sea of life. They divided again, travelling faster and in parallel lines following the direction pointed by flag and stocking.

It was perhaps half an hour later when Billy's

quick eye detected a splotch of white protruding from under a fallen log ahead. He called to Robert and ran forward, his heart beating with mingled fear and hope of what he should see. His feet were lead and would not move, he thought; yet he was running fast, catching in tangles, recovering, jumping logs, fighting each clinging, hindering vine and shrub.

When he reached the place he saw what he sought — the child. One small scratched bare foot lay out from under the torn white frock, beside the other, hardly more protected by its torn shoe and stocking. With a sick fear Billy bent to look upon the face hidden by the drooping ferns.

But when he looked, he saw a sweet little face, stained with tears but unmarred by claw or tooth, the lips red with life, her breath coming evenly.

At once he turned and gave a great shout which Robert echoed; and both blew their whistles. Instantly came replies. The sudden noise woke the child in fright, and she screamed and cowered closer; yet in a second she hushed, and peered cautiously out from her leafy nook.

“Don’t be afraid, little kid,” Billy said softly,

not touching her lest that might add to her fear. "You're lost and we've been hunting you a long time. Come out. Are you hungry?"

Between each sentence he paused, thinking she might be dazed with wandering, loneliness, and sleep, and could not at once realize that they meant her no harm. "Don't be afraid, little girl," he said again. "We've come to take you home."

She sat up and looked the boys over with calm, questioning eyes that measured them well before she spoke. "Are you a gypsy man? Because if you are, you won't take me home, but to your gypsy country."

"Not so bad as that, baby; just American boys going to take you to your mama."

"I'm not a baby," she gravely replied, creeping out of her nest, surprisingly free from stiffness. "I'm seven, and my name is Signa." But when she put her weight on her brier-torn foot she winced and cried out with pain.

Billy opened his knapsack and offered her some crackers and cheese. "Here! Eat this. You must be awfully hungry."

She took the food, but ate slowly, at which the

boys marvelled; they had expected to see her bolt it.

“Have you had anything to eat since you ran away?”

“I didn’t run away, I walked. And I had my dinner pail, and in it was some lunch I didn’t eat at school. I tooked some cookies from my Aunt Felda’s pantry too.”

The others came tearing up, expectant, excited, puffing with their speed. After so much walking an extra run told on them; but the relief of finding the little girl safe and well was as good as rest.

Billy ordered them back to a more open space to make camp, carrying the little girl himself. In a jiffy they prepared their light meal, dispensing with coffee for no one felt like taking time to hunt for water.

While Billy was carrying the child to a place of honor at their luncheon she spoke up shyly. “I ’spect my face is dirty — I didn’t wash this morning; I couldn’t find any water.”

“I’ll fix you, kid.” He put her down, took from one of his pockets a clean handkerchief, searched a moment till he found a wide, cup-

shaped leaf full of rain water in which he wet a part of the handkerchief, and went back to her. "Here you are, a whole toilet outfit, little kid."

"No, I can do it myself," she said as he began gently to wipe the smudged little face. She caught the cloth and used it vigorously.

"Weren't you afraid?" Redtop asked when the first, busy part of the meal was over.

"Of what?" she asked nonchalantly.

"Of everything: bears, the dark, and —"

"Dark doesn't hurt; it isn't anything. And bears — we don't have much of them. For a minute I was afraid of — of him." She pointed to Billy. "I thought he was a gypsy man, and they are the baddest, they are."

"She's plucky for a girl kid," Bump volunteered.

"She's plucky for anybody, boy or man. It's no sociable experience to be lost overnight in these woods, I bet." Mumps looked gloomily into the dark depths in front of them.

Some laughed, and the reaction from the long strain brought relief; but Billy interrupted it.

"Fellows, our scout has been different from

the plan, but we have found what we came after, the flag and—the good deed.”

“Oh, is that a flag? Where’s the red, white, and blue? I was cold and I wore it.” The child reached up where it hung and traced the design with her finger, the while rubbing one brier-scratched leg with her calloused little bare foot.

Billy explained the flag to her, and then to the others said, “We must start if we are to reach home to-night. There’s no time for Sunday exercises, but what do you say to a song?”

“All right! Good enough!” they shouted.

“What shall it be?”

They answered one thing and another, but the girl piped, “‘My Country, ’t is of Thee’; I can sing that.”

So there in the woods they sang the hymn, not so inappropriate as it might seem, since a country is its people, and these young citizens had performed a noble service. There was a note of thanksgiving in the voices swelling there in the forest stillness, the child’s thin treble standing out clear from the rest.

The mother was beyond speech when they brought her baby to her; but the father, who had

been summoned from the city and had spent the night in vain search, coming now from his dismal task on the lake, had more than words for two. He praised the boys, begged them to stop all night, tried to reward them, and failing that, ordered his wife to cook the best dinner "ever spread in the shack."

With difficulty Billy explained that they had no time to wait for dinners, that they must get back to the city by sunset.

The Swedish farmer frowned at this speech, and tried to dissuade them. Failing that, he made a welcome proposition. "I have a good team and carriage, my neighbor also; we'll drive you to town in two hours. To that you shall not say no."

They were glad to accept this offer, and none knew how tired they were till they were jogging on their way home. Billy's pedometer recorded forty-one miles.

They arrived in town with no adventure; and after reporting by telephone to Mr. Streeter, Billy went home to find his mother keeping dinner warm for him.

Mrs. Bennett waited on him, and listened to

as much of his story as he felt like telling; he found it hard to repeat from sheer fatigue. When he had left the table she handed him a note.

"Bess brought that to-day, and said you were to read it the minute you arrived; but I thought something to eat might prepare you. She seemed to think it of great importance." Mrs. Bennett smiled and began to clear the table; but Billy, with a prompting he could not understand, took it to his room to read.

What he saw in the printed slip, a circular in form, banished sleep, fatigue, every emotion but anger.



“Were n’t you afraid?” Redtop asked when the first busy part of the meal was over

CHAPTER XII

THE FIGHT

BILLY did not suppose he would sleep that night, so disturbing was the matter of the little circular; but nature protects youth. In a few minutes the words jumbled incoherently and lost themselves; and a night of dreamless sleep prepared him to meet the day.

His first waking thought was the circular. He caught it up and read it over, growing angrier with each line.

“A certain lily-necked, high-browed junior found the picnic plus one Dark-Eyed Beauty so enthralling that he forgot the call of the whistle, and they had a forced sample of the simple life for one night in the open.

“This is what may be expected from the kid-gloved, Sunday-school contingent represented by the haughty H. They’re all handy with the moral tacked on fore and aft to—the other fellow’s story. But when it comes to getting away with any little plum, *viz.*, the D. E. B., they’re there with both feet, and the goods. See?

“N. B. All who favor muck-raking the other man in public, and the primrose path on the sly, vote the High-brow ticket.

"N. B. No. 2. Every man who handles money for clubs or societies should be under bond. This means the Fifth Avenue High. A word to the wise is sufficient."

Billy was so disturbed by the first item that he took little note of the third, though he knew it was intended for him. But his conscience was clear; he had— A quick fear assailed him. He had not banked the money on Friday! It had been too late. School duties pressed that day, and he thought it would be perfectly safe in Miss Hartell's desk in the high-school library. How could it be otherwise?

Yet when he put on his school clothes the key to his drawer was missing! In a fever of worry he hunted through his belongings, knowing all the time that he could not have taken the key from his ring. He tried to think back over his every movement on Friday afternoon; first, his interview after the session closed with Miss Hartell about his essay; next, the meeting of the Good Citizens' Club when they had taken many initiation fees. He and Bess had counted the money and he had receipted to her for it; and last, he had locked it in the drawer, but this was after Bess had gone.

Nothing illuminating came to him. A suspicion instead filled him with indignation: Who could write such a paragraph unless he knew something to warrant it? Whoever knew that was the one who had tampered with the drawer, the lock.

Hardly able to concentrate his mind, Billy wrote out his report of the scout for filing, brushed and cleaned the flag as well as he could, and tried to settle down to study; but the lessons dragged. The words meant nothing; his mind was held by the disquieting slip, that had neither signature, nor slightest mark to show who wrote it or who printed it. That was evidence of evil intent; and if the school authorities could find out its source, they would expel the student responsible for it.

He went to the dining-room, impatient for breakfast, and while waiting his sister Edith came down with the baby. "Good-morning Billy. Baby is glad you're at home again."

Billy touched the pink cheek, and put his finger in the tiny hand that closed softly around it. He thought his sister very lovely in her sweet dignity of motherhood.

"William Bennett! Your grandfather made your name worth while, my baby, and now Uncle Billy is adding honor to it." She caressed the soft cheek.

"Don't count on me; I may not add lustre even if I do the best I can." The future loomed rather dark to him just then.

"Billy, that is all any one can do," his mother said, coming in with Mr. Wright at the moment.

Breakfast followed, and while they ate, Billy recounted the happenings of the scout.

He went early to school, and barely greeting the first comers, hastened to the library. The drawer was locked, and no trace of meddling appeared.

Puzzled and worried he went to the west entrance to wait for Erminie. Instead of seeing her he was surrounded by friends with voluble congratulations; for the morning paper, in large type and pictures, featured the adventure of little Signa and the part the Scouts had played in her rescue.

Billy wondered how such an account, fairly accurate, had been managed, and again his desire to do that work burned in him. Yet on

inquiry it was simple. The Morning News Company kept photographs on hand of every important and picturesque spot in the State, and the lake was among them.

Through Mr. Streeter they learned the main facts that concerned the boys, and also through him obtained pictures of the boys, Billy and Redtop; for the Scoutmaster's den was littered with pictures of his admiring boys.

With all the effusiveness of the greetings, Billy divined a reticence, an aloofness, even on the part of some who had been his most demonstrative friends; and on the appearance of Hector he broke away from them to tell his cousin of his difficulty.

"Perhaps I have a key that will fit the lock; those desks are nearly all alike." Together they went to the library, locking the door behind them.

The lock yielded to one of Hector's keys.

"There should be over forty dollars there," Billy said, his voice a little shaky.

"Why, didn't you bank —"

"It's gone!" Billy threw up his head and looked blankly at Hector.

"When did you put it there?"

"Last Friday. It was after banking hours when the meeting closed."

"And Saturday morning you left town. Nearly three days the start of you that thief has, Billy. I guess you're in for making good. Can I help you?" Hector's voice was sympathetic.

"I may need your help. Did you see that dodger?"

"Yes."

"When did it come out? Are there many?"

"At Buckman's meeting. It was circulated so adroitly that not one of us can tell where it came from. It just appeared. Everybody has one."

"Of course it's the Kid's game."

"Probably; but it will not be safe to say so. He's too sharp to leave an opening for proof."

"Whoever wrote that circular knows where that money went to."

"Yes. I wondered what that 'treasurer' squib meant."

"That key was stolen in this building."

"What did you do after the meeting Friday before you went home?"

Billy thought. "I threw my coat over a bench while I straightened up the drawer and locked, and then went to the lavatory to wash my hands. A lot of kids were there, joshing, and I may have been gone ten or fifteen minutes."

"Whom did you see, coming or going?"

"Gee! I can't tell, fifty, I guess."

"And you were the last to leave the library?"

"Yes, before it was locked."

"It's a mystery surely. But I must go. See you later."

The loss troubled Billy sorely, and the morning wore on dully, his books a burden, his recitations poor. At noon he waited again for Erminie. When he did not see her go out of the building as usual, he went upstairs, and watching his opportunity at a telephone when no one was near, called her up at her home.

Her mother answered. Erminie was gone, Billy could not learn where. Indeed the tremulous voice at the other end of the wire sounded as if the mother herself did not know. Above her words and his own he heard her husband's voice swearing, and the curses were coupled

with Erminie's name. But of the scraps he heard, the one that electrified him was this: "Al Short showed me that paper—"

Instantly Billy divined that he meant the circular. He was speaking with a third person in the next room. "Don't you have an idea where Erminie—"

"Billy Bennett, Erminie's whereabouts is none of your business. You've made her and us enough trouble."

He dropped the receiver. It was true. He was the cause of their trouble; he had gotten Erminie left at the picnic; he had angered Jim Barney, whose threats, Billy believed, had frightened Erminie into running away. And Billy could not say a word in her defence. She had to bear the cruel slur alone. How shameful that an innocent accident should be the scourge of a girl, perhaps for the whole of her life!

The afternoon was duller than the morning. It was near the end of the year, when the routine was somewhat relaxed, and the coming election on the morrow caused a buzz and stir, an undercurrent of restlessness that swept around and

past Billy unheeded. He sat with his eyes glued to his books, trying to think, and failing.

At the close of the session he met the officers of the Good Citizens' Club and told them of the loss of the money.

Bess, girl-like, jumped to her conclusion. "That Jim Barney has something to do with it!"

"Bess! Bess!" Reginald chided; "it's serious—accusing one of stealing with no proof against him."

"Just the same, I'm sure I'm right."

"It makes no difference who took the money, I must make it up." Billy faced them fearlessly. "Boys, and Bess, I know you'll believe me when I say I don't know a thing about where that money is. Yet I'm all to the bad for being so careless about it. I want to do the right thing, but I can't refund it all at once, not—not to —"

"Of course you can't, Billy! We'll make it up, and the club need never know. I'll lend you thirty myself, and I'm sure —"

"Here, Queen, you can't have all the glory;

the rest of us want to prove good too." Reginald shook first her hand and then Billy's.

His throat began to ache and he could not speak, but gave each a racking hand-squeeze and turned away, his eyes burning, his heart beating, yet feeling lighter than since his first glimpse of the venomous circular.

On the steps outside he met Jim Barney face to face. He had hoped this would not happen. Since the day when, a little boy, he had fought Jimmy Dorr for whipping the twins, Vilette and Evelyn, fought with every muscle in his body a twisted whip-cord of indignation, he had had no such "bloody hate" for anything living as he now felt for Jim. It took all the self-control he possessed to answer the Kid's sneering greeting calmly and pass on.

"Where have you cached the D. E. B? Money comes in handy when one has —" Jim never finished.

The double-barrelled shot was barely sped when Billy sprang upon him. Fortunately for Jim he was on the last step and had not far to fall. He had not expected Billy to retaliate. He knew that Billy prized the honors he ex-

pected to win, and did not believe he would forfeit them by fighting, no matter how great the provocation. Neither did he reckon on the reversal of his own maxim in life, "Might makes right."

Billy was proverbially good-natured. His quick wit could turn most of the "joshing" back on the "joshers," and he had learned that fighting is usually an indulgence to the blood of the beast in us, rather than an act of devotion to right. But when the man slow to fight does become enraged, especially if it is in the just cause of others, he is twice an adversary; the blood of the beast joins with the spirit of man. Right then makes might.

Billy was younger, slenderer, less skilled; for the Kid valued his "good right arm" as his chief glory in life. But right arm and skill, any force that mere physical exercise had developed, met its Waterloo in such a tide of outraged spirit as enables a little woman with a carving fork, to put to flight desperadoes, or such as now nerved Billy's arms.

In that grapple his fingers were pincers of steel. His doubled fists were derrick hammers,

and every blow brought blood. The Kid did not have time even to think of his vaunted "strangle-hold," his pet "trip-trick." He was down and under—not under a man, but a fury all legs, arms, weight, crushing knee, strangling fingers powerful beyond belief.

So fast rained the blows that the by-standers, silenced by what they read in Billy's face, hardly believed the fight begun before they saw the Kid's resistance weaken, his body grow limp. Billy realized it, and ceased his onslaught.

"Say 'enough,' or I'll kill you!" Billy's words were not loud, but they carried a white-hot power to the half-conscious fellow under him.

"Enough," came in a thick voice.

Billy got to his feet, bent and turned the Kid's face up,—a bloody, bruised face,—and set his foot on the heaving breast. "Stay where you are till I speak." His words hit like bullets. "Within a week you get out another dodger and take back the slam you gave that girl. You find the key to that desk, and return the money you stole from me—"

Billy, blinded by his passion and sure of his



“Stay where you are till I speak.”

ground, flung out his accusations, forgetting that money is visible, ponderable; that evidence to its theft must be equally convincing.

But the Kid did not forget. He was cowed but not beaten. He reached out a thick, dirty forefinger and interrupted. "Go to the man who printed that dodger if you want retraction, not to me. You've called me a thief, you son of a gun! You're the thief, and I'll prove it! I'll have you in the pen—"

Reginald and Sis Jones, who had stayed to discuss Billy's plight, now came on the scene in company with Redtop in time to see Billy spring again on the prostrate Jim.

"Hold on, Billy! Do you strike a man when he's down?"

Reginald's cool voice checked Billy's wild fury, that had leaped again at the Kid's accusation. He looked up fiercely. "He called me a thief, Reg,—a thief!"

"What evidence have you for saying that, Jim?" Reginald asked sternly while helping him to his feet.

"I'm not giving my case away."

"You'll have to, or be arrested for libel."

This was a bold stroke, but Jim thought he knew more than any of them when it came to accusation, law, and trickery. "Arrest nothing! You did n't hear me. You can't swear —"

"But these others did." Reginald glanced about at the five or six boys looking silently on at the quarrel.

"Then they'll have to bring suit, not you."

"What rot is this?" Redtop lunged forward and leaned threateningly near Jim. "I don't give a dead dog for law, but if you call Billy Bennett a thief, you loafer, I'll mop this town with you!"

It looked to Jim as if he would have two furies to fight. "I'll explain. Bill won't even try to deny that he stayed out all night after the picnic with —"

"If you bring a girl's name into this I'll kill you! I'll —"

"That's right! No girl's name may be mentioned here."

The cool, authoritative voice was the Principal's, Professor Teal's. He ordered the boys to his office, and there the story of the fight and the causes producing it were retold, save by

common consent the episode of the picnic was not touched.

"I'll take this under advisement" the Principal said quietly, when the matter had been thrashed out with no definite result. He saw it was a tangle none could unravel except those who would not. Jim had been so adroit that no gap in his story left an opening for attack.

Billy remained after the others were dismissed.

The Principal returned from closing the door, and did not speak for a moment, but stood with his back to Billy fumbling with some books on his desk. When he wheeled Billy saw a different Principal from the one he knew, calm, cheerful yet powerful and a little stern. Instead, he saw a sorrowful face.

"Bennett, I can't tell you how I regret this. I—I suppose you know that if you have not a more convincing explanation you'll lose your honors? — perhaps have to leave the school?"

"Yes, Professor Teal."

"Can you tell me privately anything more than I heard? As it is, you are charged with theft, and have been fighting."

Billy hesitated. "I—I think I can say no more."

After another silence the man asked suddenly, "Did the picnic episode noted in that circular refer to you?"

Billy's eyes blazed. "It did."

"You are the last one I should have suspected had I not heard Barney's remark. How did it happen?"

"It was an accident. My watch went wrong."

"That was unfortunate."

"Professor Teal," Billy burst out suddenly, "I believe my watch was purposely set back, for it has never varied before nor since. Some one planned the whole thing for spite. How else could any one have known about it? We came home separately and—and— Not one moment of that night is one we need be ashamed of."

"Then I shall have two or three of the teachers hear your report and the young woman's—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Teal, I would never give her name."

"Will she not wish to do this herself?"

“I think not. My silence will protect her. That’s what I fought Jim Barney for.” And when the man did not reply at once, Billy added impulsively, “Mr. Teal, in my place would you give away a girl?”

The man turned, laid a kindly hand on Billy’s shoulder, and smiled. “Billy, if I had the pluck I wouldn’t. But go home and tell your mother.”

“I—I had hoped not to worry her.”

“I’ve met your mother; and from what I know of her I think she’s worrying already. Moreover, she will have to know why you lose your honors, won’t she?”

“I—I guess you’re right. I’ll tell her.”

He bade the Principal good-bye and started off with a buoyance that surprised him, for he was stiff and sore, and he knew his standing among his mates was lost.

Not till he was nearly home did he think of his troop. Would the Scoutmaster take away his badges? He must, if the theft of funds was known. For Mr. Streeter the return of the money would not be enough; he must know that Billy did not commit the theft.

"He need never know; they have made up the sum," Billy thought. Yet instantly he knew that was neither justification nor proof of his innocence.

CHAPTER XIII

ERMINIE TIES ANOTHER KNOT

BILLY told his mother all except Erminie's connection with the situation, which his stubborn loyalty withheld. But Mrs. Bennett had seen the circular and drawn her own conclusions, which were the same as Bess's, though the older woman saw there was no way of reaching Jim Barney. She resented the heartlessness of the girl who could allow Billy to bear the blame alone, though of course she did not connect her in any way with the theft.

"Billy, Billy! I thought you had at least learned to keep your money in a bank."

"I told you the bank was closed."

"I could have banked it for you."

"I never thought of that."

"'Never thought' doesn't lock the door, nor rebuild the burned house. Of course I shall advance the money, but that does not clear you. Your brother Hal is too busy to be troubled just

now, but before school opens in the Autumn everything must be straightened out. Perhaps before that the girl will see fit to speak—”

“She can’t tell anything about the money.”

“But she can clear up the picnic matter.”

“But I shall not return to school, mother; I am going to work for Mr. Smith the Monday after school closes.”

Mrs. Bennett looked at him sternly a moment. “Billy, don’t you know that you are still my little boy in the eyes of the law? You will have to go to school if I require it.”

Billy put his arm around her. “Yes, mother; but you won’t require it if a woman’s good name depends on my doing what I think right.”

She returned his earnest look and sighed. “Perhaps you’re right, Billy. At least I cannot live your life for you. Take your position for the Summer, and afterward—we’ll see.” Mrs. Bennett had learned that patient waiting, more often than opposition, adjusts tangled matters wisely.

The election for president of the student body took place the next day, at the close of the afternoon session. All day groups of students at ev-

ery opportunity had discussed the situation in low tones. It was known to both factions that the teachers were watching carefully, and that on the slightest indication of disorder or chicanery they would interfere.

The Kid was openly jubilant, and his forces full of brag, though Walter Buckman did not quite conceal his anxiety. But Hector's friends were serious, extraordinarily quiet, yet mysteriously busy.

Several of the leading boys wore badges bearing an inscription none but the initiated could read. These were seen to be in close conversation for a moment at a time with student after student; and after each such conversation the badge-wearer was seen to pass a card. He was especially busy among the girls.

Observing these groups, sensitive Billy thought they often glanced his way; and he noticed that the active ones were all his friends. But none of them came to him. It was the first mark of disapproval they had shown him. Among the workers were Redtop, Sis Jones, Reginald, and Mumps, his four best friends except Hector.

He watched them pass and repass during the noon hour, always with a pleasant nod but too busy to stop. In the halls he met them as groups passed to the recitation rooms, and outside it was the same. And even Bess, who always had time for a word, now waved to him and actually hurried away.

At last he could endure inaction no longer. He wanted to be in the fight, to be doing things for Hector. The truth did not occur to him till he finally appealed to his cousin at the close of the session. "Say, Hec, what do the fellows mean, leaving me out of your fight? I've chewed the rag with myself all day, expecting I'd be asked to kick in for something; but they've passed me by as if I were a stone dog or a skunk cabbage."

"Don't get peeved, Billy. You don't know the whole game. Our boys are secretly fixing the lie on the circular. We've found out the whole business, name of the printer, and how much he got for concealing the name of his press; but we're not talking out loud, because that would queer things."

"Gee! That's great!"

“Every one in the school who holds club or society funds has been investigated and found to the good.”

“That — that —”

“Fixes you. Of course I’m not supposed to be busy on any of this, neither are you supposed to be interested. See?”

Billy looked down and scraped the floor absently with his toe. “I see I’m a heavy drag on you, Hec. I’ve about knocked you silly.”

Redtop, hurrying by, heard this. “Stop running off at the mouth, Billy To-morrow! We’ve got them shot all to pieces; only it’s on the q. t. till after the trick is turned. It’s your cue — ours, all of us — to look all in, meachin’ like. We’ll hit the cheers later.”

And so it transpired. The contest was quickly over. Hector won by a clear majority of thirty-seven. The jollification followed; and several of the teachers, waiting in the building conveniently in case of difficulty, came into the assembly room and listened to the riot of exultation.

The other party was dazed. They had counted so confidently on Jim Barney’s contention that “queering Billy meant queering Hec Price,”

that they could not at once realize their defeat. Their leader was a master at vilifying; but had not lived long enough to know that reputation is cumulative and powerful for better or for worse. Billy had built his good name in the school too surely to be downed by one blow; and the students who didn't know Billy proved their good sense by voting for Hector on his merits instead of his connections.

But the leader "played his game" to the end. After Hector had closed his speech of appreciation, the Kid claimed the floor and delivered a scathing speech, full of innuendo, and interrupted by hisses and cat-calls, and ending with a startling threat.

"I leave school in a few days. I know the schools are run in the interest of certain political factions, in the interest of the classes. I'll be a voter pretty soon; and when I am, I'll have my father and his bunch behind me, and we'll make school matters sizzle. We'll see that student rights are not invaded by teachers, and that the smooth-tongued element gets what's coming—"

Because Hector had been the speaker's opponent he felt that his first act in the newly created

chair could not be one of repression; but now the speech was becoming so incendiary that riot threatened. The factions vied with each other in demonstration, each going as far as it dared in the presence of teachers.

At this point Hector rapped for order, ineffectually at first but insistently; and two or three of Barney's followers who had another year in the school to forfeit if they overstepped discipline, plucked at him and audibly warned him that he was likely to lose his diploma.

He glared at them and went on. "They can't do it. They can't refuse me my diploma because I exercise the right of free speech. I can call the President of the United States any name I please, and the president of a school-board or a principal is no better, because my taxes support all of 'em. I—"

He got no farther. Redtop whispered something in Walter Buckman's ear that made him start up in his seat. He reached over and pulled the Kid down, and three or four boys hustled him from the room. And Hector adjourned the most threatening meeting in the history of the school.

Affairs moved on to the end of the term in outward quiet; yet the Principal, aided by a few of the teachers, carried on a thorough search for the author of the circular, that proved little. The small firm that printed the circulars told what they knew, but said the business was carried on entirely through correspondence. The copy being private matter required no signature, and the payment was by coin brought by a small boy whom they could not identify, and to whom they delivered the order.

Thus when graduation came, Jim Barney stepped arrogantly forward and, as the others, received his diploma. Billy's anger swelled again, but he could not indulge it for long. There was Reginald who had won first place, delivering his oration with a power that cheered; and many others Billy knew, receiving well earned rewards. Only Erminie's name was not called, and Billy felt anew his remorse as he remembered that but for him she would have been there, more beautiful than any of them.

Next year it would be Hec and Redtop, Bess, Sis Jones, and all the "gang"; and he would not be with them. This was the last day of school

for him. But soon he forgot regret in the midst of good-byes, bustle, and joyous confusion, that presently subsided and left the gray building silent and ghostly for the long summer vacation.

Saturday was a busy day, spent at home in preparation for work, in "squaring up" troop duties, a bit of shopping, and other matters that had been put off till the end of school. He was to sleep at home, but would leave early for his work and return late. There would be little time for other matters.

For weeks, beneath the push of increasing duties, he vainly had tried to down the ache that came with thought of Erminie. She had not written. He missed her, and was hurt, sore because she had gone without a word to him, and had not let him know her hiding-place. He tried to excuse her. He invented a dozen ways in which a note she might have left for him could have gone astray. But the ache still lingered.

The Sunday before he left home was the hardest day of all. He was tired. His bridges were burned behind him, and his march ahead, not begun, was portentous with unknown trials.

He worried himself with visions of Erminie ill, in trouble, alone, or perhaps worse, with people who mistreated her. Might the struggle be too much for her? Might she end it?

But he did not dwell long on that thought. Erminie was too cheerful, stout of heart, too bright and winning, and life meant too much to her; she would not fail. One thing, however, haunted him persistently: she would need money, and he could not send it to her.

The day wore on. In the evening they gathered around the piano and sang the songs they loved, Billy's smooth, rich bass making the family quartette complete. It was nine o'clock, and Billy was saying good-night because he must be up and off by six in the morning, when a messenger came with an "immediate delivery" letter for Billy.

At last! He felt sure that it was from Erminie and his heart jumped, though he held his face calm. He was glad the address was typewritten,—they would think it was from the troop, or from some of the boys on important business. With a hasty excuse he took it to his room to read. There he tore it open, sur-

prised that his hand was trembling, his breath coming in gusts.

“DEAREST BILLY:

“You must have worried about me something awful. I did not write before because you told me not to. At first I didn’t know what to do, but now I’m going to stay right here. They want me to. It was perfectly darling of you to let me have that money, so much too. And I know you’ll need it. But what a funny way to send it! I’m sending two dollars. I can’t spare more yet.

“I had an awful chin with the Kid the night before I went away, the night you were on the scout. As soon as I saw that dodger I called him up over the phone and told him to come over; and he did, and we walked and talked and talked. He wanted to go and sit in the park, but I would n’t. I told him he’d have to take back all he said, but he was nasty. He said he had both of us right where he wanted us; that I had lied to him, and a few more like that; and he was n’t even yet,—he’d only begun. There was more coming.

“Billy, I hated to run away and leave you to bear everything alone; and I hate it when I can’t even tell you where I am; but as long as you told me to do it, and wait four weeks before writing, I’ve done just as you said, though it’s been hard. I’m sure you know best. But why did you typewrite it?

“Don’t worry about me. I’m at my cousin’s,—my uncle’s house, and they treat me fine. I don’t have to do anything that I don’t wish to, and Cousin Will is dandy. Tell ma this; though I suppose you won’t since you fixed everything safe for me. Poor ma! I’m sorry for her.

“I’m sending you a thousand kisses and a heartfelt of love. I’ll send more money as soon as I can earn it.

“Your loving, troublesome Erminie.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE BLACK HAND

THE Summer was well on toward September. Billy's first business that Monday morning in June when he made his final break with boyhood was to go to Mr. Smith's Tumwah Valley office for instructions. Here Mr. Smith came every morning to see how his big concerns were going in earth and rock, before he took them up in his town offices in the mystic symbolism of paper and figures, and business policy and confidence,—all that vast idealism which is so much more really the business of the world than are the products of the earth we live on.

From the open door of the artistic, vine-covered log building Billy could look up the steep hill to Tuk-wil-la (hazel-nuts), Mr. Smith's summer home, set in the edge of the forest overlooking the little valley and the broad Lake Kal,lak-a-la-chuck.

Mr. Smith's instructions were brief. "I told you it would be no picnic, Billy. This is your stunt: take your shovel and go to work with those Dagos on the grade. Learn all of 'em, the look of the face, walk, and whatever you can pick up of their talk. You'll have to slouch along and be a Dago yourself. Mind, I don't want any tattling,—just to know if they are plotting any mischief, that's all. And don't come near me unless you're called. Treat me as you see them treat me. See?"

"I'll try," Billy answered. He went to the foreman for his tools, and set to work.

The hard work, the long hours, and Billy's youth unaccustomed to labor left him at night little more than a log to roll into bed, sleep heavily, and go dully off in the morning to another day of digging. It was no wonder that the strange situation of being engaged to marry a young woman and already entered upon his life obligation of providing her home, and yet not knowing where she was, did not weigh upon him as much as he had thought it would.

But as he became hardened to his labor, her problem grew more obtrusive, and he longed

to hear from her. He puzzled over the one, the only letter he had received, trying by many readings to understand it, but it revealed less and less meaning. That she had received a letter purporting to be from him instructing her to take the money from his club fund, go away, and not write for four weeks, and even then not reveal her location,—this he gathered. But how she came by such a letter which he had never written, how she could be deceived in the writing, how she got the desk drawer open,—these and many other questions would have become unendurable had he not been so engrossed with his new life.

Through the papers he had seen that her father had failed in business, that Mr. Alvin Short was the chief creditor, and that the home had been sold. It also transpired that Mr. Fisher's business record was not one of which any son-in-law could be proud.

Billy could never recover from his disgust at the camp feeding where the dirty crew bolted better food than they were accustomed to in silent haste, and yet complained. It was some time before the well-bred boy could mentally

detach himself and imagine he was in his own home; but he partly accomplished this feat at last, and ate with better appetite.

He found one among them, an American whose better upbringing had somewhat survived the tramping that had gone with the bottle. He was now "doing his yearly stunt" at work, he said, putting by enough to keep him out of "the poor house, or the chain gang, or whatever is the fashion for the gentry of the road in the town I strike next Winter."

At one corner of the table they ate together, and sometimes talked a little, while the rest fed. But he was a philosopher, and Billy learned from him many things that set him thinking. "Billy, a man must fight and wait," the man broke out suddenly one day, "before he can fight and win." They were lying under a *madroño* tree, resting after the midday meal.

"You'll have to switch on the light; I don't get a glimmer," Billy replied lazily.

"Anybody can fight, when he has to; even a dog does; but few of us have the grit to fight and hold on. You're just beginning life, my boy; hold on."

"I mean to do that."

"Not to this! It is a dog's life—to slave for another man, feed, sleep, wake, and do it all over again. I shall not do it much longer. But you—don't form the quitting habit; hold, and all the time search for something better. Then your fight tells. See?"

"Yes. But what's the matter with you? Why don't you do a little holding yourself?"

The man's eyes darkened and he frowned. "Too late."

"It's never too late."

The man jerked himself up, and energy flashed in the weak face. "Not too late for you. Opportunity will pass your way many times. Catch her every time—hold her. By Heaven! With your face and body, your clean mind and good brain, you can do anything,—be a young god. Billy, a fellow at the open door of life doesn't suspect his power, doesn't use a fraction of it." He reached his hand up to the summer sky. "Up there, down here," he dug his foot into the fecund earth, "a thousand million possibilities wait for us to draw them forth with our minds."

"And you?" Billy asked as the other looked off gloomily.

He wheeled almost angrily. "I? I have ruined my chances. It takes a clear eye, a steady hand, and a clean heart—mind you, a clean heart—to see and hear the secrets up there, down here." Again he indicated earth and sky. "Under desert skies, miles from any human habitation, I've watched the stars march from purple twilight to golden morning, and heard things—whispers right out of heaven that would have been triumph for me if—if I had been fit."

The foreman called, and they took up their shovels; and Billy's was no longer heavy. But the man settled into his habitual silent, uneven effort.

Side by side they worked till mid-afternoon, when the Smiths' machine appeared in the distance, May Nell alone in the tonneau. Billy's first impulse was to straighten and greet her, but it flashed across him that the men must not know of his acquaintance with the daughter of the "boss." "Stand in front of me, will you?" he asked of the man, and bent to re-tie his shoe.

"What did you do that for?" the tramp inquired as the machine flew by. "Do you know her? If you do, don't let any devilish pride keep you from standing in her presence, a man, clean-faced or dirty."

Billy grinned. "That's all right; it's part of my game."

"I don't get you."

"It's not because my face is dirty, or that she would care—she's pure gold—but because it's part of my job to do that."

"All right; you know your cards; I don't."

Billy's eyes twinkled. "This is the fight," he waved his hand around toward the sweating, bending crew; "and not letting her see me is the holding on. See?"

The philosopher smiled. "You've caught on, all right."

That night after work, and supper, and when Billy was trudging down the hill to get the car for home, he met the machine again. He tried to dodge it for workmen were passing, some lounging along the dusty road in groups.

May Nell saw him and ordered the driver to stop. "What do you mean, Billy Boy, by refus-



“What do you mean, Billy Boy, by refusing to speak to me?”

ing to speak to me? I saw you this afternoon. Your shoe didn't need—"

"Miss Smith, I—"

She stiffened as if struck.

"Miss Smith, circumstances alter cases," Billy added quietly.

She was conscious of the slower gait of the dark passers, their smiles and frank curiosity.

"I'm sorry I can't tell you any more, lady," he finished with a comical imitation of the obsequious attitude of the foreign workman to his employers. "I tell-a the Big-a Boss."

She laughed and ordered the machine on, but he saw the perplexity in her face as she sped away.

Billy turned to meet a leering, grinning Italian face. "Boss-a girl vera good look-a." He gave Billy a nudge that permitted no resentment, since Billy had encouraged familiarity from the workmen. "You lika?"

Billy ached to "spoil his face." Instead, "Be prepared" came instantly to his mind. He pointed to the palatial home on the hill, Tuk-wil-la. "Queens! Understand?"

The man nodded.

Billy stooped and gathered a handful of the dust at his feet and pointed to himself. "Me. Understand?"

Again the man nodded, but with a queer look, half credulity, half suspicion, and trudged on.

Billy had not grown up in the vineyard country of California without learning something of Italian peasantry, and he had not worked a week before he knew the men had a grievance. He got an Italian primer and a phrase book, and utilized his time on the car, which was nearly two hours each day, for studying, with the result of being shortly able to catch the drift of most that was said around him. So it was that as the Summer passed he learned and reported enough of their crude plottings to keep Mr. Smith on his guard.

When Billy arrived home a second letter from Erminie awaited him, and again behind his locked door he read it, wondering as he tore it open, that he did not feel the same excited hurry as over the first one. It was the unsatisfactory letter of one unaccustomed to correspondence and without the natural gift for it, yet it was surprising enough.

“DEAREST BILLY:

“Here is five dollars more. I’ll be able to pay up soon now, for Cousin Will got me a job. It has seemed a long time to wait, six weeks; but I’m doing just as you said in that letter of instruction, Billy.

“I want to tell you again, Billy, that I would rather have faced it out with you, because I wasn’t afraid to stand up to anybody about that night, with you so splendid to me. It’s all right. Whatever you say goes about that business.

“I can’t understand yet how it was you knew all about the circular, and had it all planned out — what I was to do — before you went on the scout. None of us knew about it, the dodger I mean, till Saturday night. And how was it, Billy, that you had me send the key to a place away over in North City? I didn’t know any of your friends lived over there. The way I put it up is that some one there is to act in the club *pro tem.* for you this Summer, while you are working.

“I like my work just fine. Such a jolly bunch, hayseeds of course, but I’m getting so I don’t mind that. And they’re all so nice to me, especially the boys. But Cousin Will don’t let any of ’em get funny. They all think I’m his steady.

“I’m sending a letter to ma in this. Please mail it. I expect she’s about crazy. I sent one to the home number. I had to do that, Billy, if you did tell me not to. That was n’t a bit like you, Billy. But the letter came back. If this goes to the general delivery maybe she’ll get it. You’ll send it, won’t you, Billy? She’s lost her home, you know; I saw it in the paper. Or Will did.

“So long, dear Billy. Don’t forget me, though I’m not worth remembering. I think a lot of you. If I amount to anything it’ll be a lot because of you.

"Cousin Will is dandy to me, so thoughtful,—lots like you, only he's a hayseed too; but I don't mind that; I'm getting used to it. He's twenty-four.

"Your loving Erminie."

Billy stared at the sheet a long time, turning it over and over, and scrutinizing the envelope as if he might make it tell him something more. What could it all mean? Who had sent her that letter? Planned her movements so carefully and forged his name? And the money? He didn't see yet how she could have got it out of the drawer at school even if she did have a key.

Twenty-four! An old fellow that Will was. He wasn't really her cousin either. Billy set his teeth and wished he were free to set out on a search for her. The letter was postmarked Portland, Oregon. The other had been the same. But of course the place where she was must be the country, and some distance too, or she would not call the people hayseeds.

Suddenly the task of finding a girl somewhere in the State of Oregon with nothing but that postmark to guide him revealed to him its hopelessness; and too restless to sleep he went out and walked,—faster and faster, without realizing it, going south.

With every step the puzzle grew worse. Only one grain of comfort showed: Erminie's letter would prove him no thief. Why, yes! that really fastened the proof on him, and worse, showed that he was taking care of her. That was no way out of the tangle.

Who could be using his name for this business? Of course, no one but the Kid, and he was too cunning to be caught. And where was that key? Would some of the boys get it, and never know where it came from? And the desk drawer—whose would it be when September found that silent old pile ringing again with a thousand student voices?

At length he found himself in the southernmost park of the city, not so very far from Tumwah. Exhausted, he threw himself on one of the benches, drawing well within the shadows that he might, unmolested, go over again all the matters that troubled him.

While he mused, he became gradually conscious of voices approaching, and he was sensible of some ominous import in them. He knew they were Italians. Instantly he dropped to the

grass and crept behind the bench, intending to go on as soon as they passed.

They were quarrelling, but speaking in guarded tones, vehemently. Billy heard broken bits, "More, more," and "Thousand dollars," in English; and in Italian, names of places he knew were in Italy. But nothing excited him till he heard, "the boss," and "in the lake!"

The Black Hand! That had put its mark on Mr. Smith! Well, even the Black Hand might find its mate in a white one!

Billy was not so frightened as he might have been, had he known less of their ways, these hot-headed Latins that live in America, but not *of* it till a second generation binds them to the soil. He knew their allegiance to hates and friendships rooted in the land they had left; and perhaps what he had heard was only a scheme to "even up" somewhere, and concerned Mr. Smith only so far as the fact that the money they earned came from him.

The men went by slowly, halting once or twice, and Billy crept cautiously out and followed them at a distance till they came under one of the park lamps that revealed them perfectly.

Billy knew them; one was the man who had chaffed him about May Nell.

He hurried around by the gate on the other side and took a car for home, where he called up Mr. Smith at Tuk-wil-la.

"It sounds important, Billy. Out with it."

"It's not to be told over the wire. But please don't leave your house to-night—"

"To-night? It's twelve o'clock. You've got me out of bed."

"Well, let me see you in the morning before you leave the house, then; it may be nothing,—what I have to tell,—and it may be a good deal."

"All right, boy. Don't worry yourself. Nothing is as bad in the morning as it seems at night. Good-night."

But in spite of that bit of truth Billy went to bed to dream of swarthy banditti, Italian caves, beautiful maids held for ransom, and hair-breadth escapes known only to dreams.

CHAPTER XV

A GLEAM OF LIGHT

WHEN Billy rang at Tuk-wil-la the next morning Mr. Smith was waiting for him; and safely in the den Billy told his story. At the close he was astonished to hear Mr. Smith chuckle softly.

“Look at that curiosity.” He handed the boy a smudged and rumpled letter.

It was a threat common enough to men of large concerns, ill-spelled, blotted, and signed with a black hand. It demanded ten thousand dollars, to be delivered by Mr. Smith in person and alone, the next night at a certain designated hour and place; and failure to comply meant certain death to one of his family.

“Sounds creepy, doesn’t it, Billy?”

“What will you do?”

“What they tell me to do,—with a difference.”

“You—surely you won’t go, Mr. Smith!”

"Surely I will. But three or four good men will be hidden out there in the bushes."

"Gee! I'd like to be one; I can shoot."

Mr. Smith shook his head, and his smile died. "This is probably comic opera, yet—you're your mother's only son, and there might be a bit of a scrimmage. Besides I have other work for you."

"All right."

Mr. Smith smiled, for Billy's tone was not hearty. "The Tum-wah people's second injunction is out; but I can take care of that well enough, if I can beat daylight on another proposition." He rose and took a turn or two around the room, one hand in his pocket, the other pulling roughly at his mustache. "Do you know what our real trouble is?"

"The city won't let you have the right of way over the boulevard? Is that it?"

"Yes. Do you know why?"

Billy looked up shrewdly. "You won't pay the price?"

"Right, the first guess. Alvin Short wants to cinch us. And the worst of it is, if he gets what he asks, he'll bleed us every time we cross a

street or cut an alley. Now your job is this: to watch this property while the Smith family go on an excursion."

Billy could not help showing his surprise. Usually the force of servants was trusted to do that.

Mr. Smith laughed and nodded through the window to where thick green woods swept an impenetrable curtain past the singing falls, past the private grounds, and down the hill. "The boulevard lies through there. It won't be built for two years, yet I may not go over it nor under nor across it till they get their price. Billy, there's—how many points of law in possession?"

Billy smiled but was discreetly silent.

"I want six of the Italian bunch down there," he nodded toward the valley below, where men were already gathering for the day's work. "I want six that work, and don't talk. Can you pick 'em out?"

Billy named six, but recommended the tramp-philosopher.

"No, not any Americans; not on this job. Now I must go down to the grade, stop the

work, and pay off the men. I guess that's all, Billy. Your work here begins to-morrow night. Sorry it's not to be at our picnic."

When Billy left him and started down the steps, May Nell came running out to meet him. "Billy! Wait a minute!"

The sun touched her hair to brighter gold. She was rosier, fuller of cheek than formerly, and rounder of neck and arm, with an indescribable dignity that was not quite a woman's, yet more than girlish.

"I heard you and hurried out to catch you. I never see you any more."

"I'm pretty busy these days."

"Tell me why you called me 'Miss Smith' the other day."

"I'm only your father's hired workman down there—as I am anywhere for that matter—and those fellows mustn't see me presume to speak to you."

She laughed merrily. "That seems positively funny, Billy, when I think of the day you led me into your mother's house with a sheet pinned round me, a woman's skirt torn and trailing, and my toes showing through my shoes."

"But now your father is worth a million and—and my face is dirty." They had stopped near the conservatory, and he saw himself in a window that greenery behind had turned into a mirror, and laughed not quite mirthfully.

She caught his hand—hard and grimy—in her soft ones. "Your heart isn't dirty, Billy. And I want you to remember always that I think you are the very best boy in the world."

They laughed lightly, and Billy ran off, and that day the shovel was light.

May Nell and her mother went away, the servants were given a vacation, and the house closed. It looked rather lonely when Billy came in the early evening. He had a room in the garage, and was to be on duty practically all of the time. This was not arduous, for the entire place was enclosed in a high barbed-wire fence, as effective as if not hidden by honeysuckle, wild rose, and clematis; and at night the gates were locked and two Great Danes policed the grounds.

The first evening was a test of Billy's courage, not because anything happened, but because it was the first night of his life absolutely away from human beings. And also because his mind

was with Mr. Smith, wondering what was happening, and magnifying the danger.

Morning came, and a telephone message saying, "Nothing doing; the blackmailers caught on." And Billy almost forgot to be glad, so disappointed was he at the tame ending of his adventure.

As the day passed, he knew something was going on in the forest. Soft voices came occasionally above the roar of the falls and the clink of iron; and in the evening he detected the odor of fresh coffee and toasting bacon. And Billy knew — Mr. Smith was crossing the boulevard!

Visitors and men on business, applying at the gate or by telephone, soon lessened; and the rest and time for reading stimulated Billy to thought of things unremembered during the months of hard work. Each day he opened and aired the house, and found in the library books that made the hours short.

Vague ideas he had hardly glimpsed for the flag design now took shape. The banner of the city! It must be a noble idea, yet simple, one that all would love; and it must be like the city,

—the City of Green Hills. It was also a city of blue waters and bluer skies.

Each day he dreamed over it till at last the idea bodied itself in a spire-crowned, forest-enfolded hill, with a sea at its base and the declining sun on the far horizon. A shallop in full sail was setting forth toward the sun.

There it was, the green hill, the city, the sea and its commerce. But this was present and future; something must show what had been vanquished. Rather sadly Billy put in an Indian and a bear at the edge of the forest, both looking backward.

A sudden reminder came to him,—he was no longer a school-boy. With the resignation of his office of treasurer of the Good Citizens' Club of the Fifth Avenue High he had severed every link between him and school. Yet he was still a club member,—that admitted him to the competition. He felt out of it all, old,—was he old before his time? He thought of his mother's words, and then of Erminie, and—of May Nell.

After about twelve days Mr. Smith appeared suddenly. His shoes were dusty and his hands

and cuffs soiled; but he was oddly jaunty, as if some great load had been lifted.

“Didn’t expect to see me, did you, Billy?”

Billy returned the greeting, and waited, wondering where his employer could have been.

“Great job, Billy! All done. As good a viaduct over that boulevard site as there is in the city. I’ve just been looking it over. Did you know it was building?”

Billy smiled. “I only suspected.”

“Good boy! You may see it now, any time you wish; but the men who built it won’t be there.”

Billy looked inquiringly but did not speak.

“It’s all right, boy; everything’s right. We’ll be riding on our own railroad in a week.”

“Knock on wood.” Billy laughed.

“That’s right. There’s many a slip betwixt rail and tie. Run into town for a couple of days, boy, and see your mother. I’ll look after the house now.”

“Thank you. I—”

“Oh, and you need n’t say I am here.”

Billy was glad of the two days’ visit at home.

It had never seemed so pleasantly dainty and quiet; and it was good to spend some time with his family when he was neither sleepy nor in a hurry. He called up some of "the kids" over the wire and began to feel young again. Sydney answered excitedly, and what he said took Billy flying across the town to see him, when he caught a glimmer of a clue to the mystery that had enveloped him all Summer.

"A Postal Telegraph kid I know saw Jim Barney go by one day," Mumps began, "and that set the boy talking. 'That's a crooked one,' he said, and then he told this story. He said that he took a letter for Kid Barney once late at night to a girl,—a mighty good-looker, he called her,—and the next morning he went to the same place to get another letter; and in both was something hard, a key he thought it was. This made me sit up, and I asked him where the girl lived, and he said East Street, somewhere in the seven hundred block."

"That's Erminie!" Billy burst out.

"Sure. And that letter had—"

"That letter was a forged one from me, and

it ordered her to take the money and run away, and not let any one know where she was."

"Jiminy! How do you know that much?"

Billy told briefly of receiving the two letters.

"Where can I find that telegraph boy?"

"He's gone to the country for a few days, but he'll be back."

"Then we can clean it all up, and—" Suddenly all the hope died out of his face, and he turned away dejectedly. "No use, Mumps; there's nothing doing."

"You bet there is! Now that I know so much, I'll have it out myself with—"

"Mumps, it's just where it was before. Nothing can be done in the matter without bringing in the girl, and that we can't do."

"Then it's straight, what all the fellers are saying, that you two stayed out all night at the picnic?"

"I'm not acknowledging that," Billy said sternly; and then wheeled quickly. "Nothing happened that night that the whole world might not have seen."

Sydney looked his sympathy and his entire understanding. "I see."

"My watch was set back that night."

Sydney jumped to his feet. "Gee whack! Did your coat hang on a tree back of the dancing place?"

"Yes, for a time."

"I saw the Kid fooling with something there, saw him hurry away just as I turned the corner. And that minute you passed me; but it was n't very light, and you did n't notice me."

Billy was silent for a time. "Mumps, all this may help me some day, but not now. Will you keep track of that messenger?"

Mumps promised, and after some further discussion that was barren, they separated.

The second day Billy spent with the Scouts, visiting each troop, hearing of their scouting trips, watching the practice work, and with Mr. Streeter going over the plans for the great civic review of the Scouts, the Good Citizens' Clubs, and the ceremony of accepting the successful flag design and awarding the prize.

The evening of the second day Billy went back to Tum-wah. He was not due till morning, but he had become already a part of the great activities incipient there, which his imagination could

see perfected and powerful. He felt by proxy the responsibility and the joy of it.

Mr. Smith in his machine overtook Billy trudging up the hill, and took him in.

"Ought I to ride — be seen riding with —"

"Jump in! You should not have come back before time, but I'm glad you did. After to-night your job is over, and you'll have a better one."

"Why, what — what's doing?" Billy began, too astonished even to realize the import of Mr. Smith's remark.

"Yes; find things changed, don't you? We've been busy."

When Billy left, the grade had stretched bare and brown for miles without tie or rail. Now, except a short gap at the station and the half-mile of contested right of way the track was completed up the hill and into the forest.

"The girls took a notion to come home ahead of time — surprise." Mr. Smith looked toward the villa. "I hate surprises! Bad enough in business; but this — Well, now they're here, we'll have to take care of 'em, Billy."

The boy thrilled at being included as a de-

fender of the two in the house they were approaching.

"Get down in the tonneau," Mr. Smith commanded. "They must not know you're here — and to watch; they'll be uneasy."

Billy obeyed.

"Stay here — out of sight — till I come again; I won't be gone long." Mr. Smith drove to the garage, but not in, and Billy got out and went to an inner room, his sleeping apartment.

As he had feared he heard May Nell's voice when her father returned to the machine. But he got rid of her.

"Run back, kiddie. I have some figuring to do, and then I must see a man at Tum-wah, and some other things — it may be very late before I get back."

"It's your birthday, papa. We came home to celebrate —"

"To-morrow night will do as well; make the old house hum if you like to-morrow."

"I suppose I'll have to be satisfied," May Nell said, and Billy heard the crunch of her slippers in the gravel.

"Come out, Billy. I have time to burn," Mr.

Smith called; and as Billy entered he saw the anxiety the man could not conceal. "If anything suspicious occurs don't wait to investigate but call up South 265, and tell 'em to come at once; then me at Tum-wah."

"Why don't you have—the police, is it?—on hand before—"

"I didn't expect to have women in on this deal. And—there are times when one must have the trouble *before* he calls for the cure. Sometimes that makes a point in law."

He was silent a long time. And the night, too, seemed stiller to Billy than usual. Not a breath of wind was stirring, and nothing was moving out on the road, though the hum of the distant electric car was making itself heard.

"By George, Billy! I don't want trouble," the man broke out suddenly. "If those Tum-wah fellows had let me alone I'd have been willing to divvy even, and they'd have had twice as much as they have now. But they've hogged the game. They've pushed their injunction suits, and fixed these Dago gardeners. Last night they tried to blow up my grade."

"They did?" Billy began to realize that

there might be a shadow of the Black Hand after all.

“But I’ve got the jump on ’em, Billy; got ’em in the neck, by George! They’ve violated their franchise,—I have the evidence in black and white; and if this night’s work meets any interference I’ll put their old once-a-some-time-in-the-day cattle cars out of business.”

He lit a cigar and puffed at it nervously. Billy had never seen him in this mood before.

“They think I want to get the land round here for nothing. Boy, when a *real* man wants to make money, he takes something out of Nature that’s worthless, or worth little—or perhaps it’s man’s waste—and makes that thing, after a dose of brains and a civilized dress, worth good money. But a lazy man jumps a lot of land and sits down to listen to his neighbors holler for it. In your time, my son, the people will have their eyes open, and there’ll be no land going that way. Then you’ll have to use your brains to think up new things.”

“Sometimes it seems as if all the new things had been thought up.”

“New things! Why, Billy, if every man

should invent a new job there'd still be as many coming. Look about you and see how many little things need fixing. And who has made use of sawdust? We burn millions of dollars' worth every day. They'll be making hot cross buns out of it some day. Look at the thistles, nettles, base ores, the millions burned up in sewage. Think of the untended, burned, and rotting forests,—billions go that way. Think of the deserts even along foggy sea coasts,—why, when we really use our brains we'll condense that fog, irrigate with it, and raise pineapples where the horned toad now preëmpts all the real estate."

He stopped a moment, rolled his cigar in his fingers, and looked out of the open door; while Billy, breathless, waited for him to go on.

"Think of the tide. Billy, men of the twenty-first century will run nearly everything in the world that calls for power by the force of the tide. They'll turn it into acres of light, and heat, and force their garden truck with it. They'll cook with it, grind with it, carry it up mountains and down into mines; drive with it, fly with it, and laugh at us for troglodytes."

Both laughed softly, and Mr. Smith presently

rose. "I guess I'll go down to the grade and kill time there. May Nell might come again; she does n't have as much respect for business as you do, Billy."

"Perhaps it would be the same with me if you were my father, though I don't see—how—" He hesitated, wondering what life would mean with such a man for father.

"Perhaps so. Well, lie low. And don't let the girls know you're here."

With that Mr. Smith got into the machine and chugged off down the hill.

CHAPTER XVI

A NIGHT OF DISASTER

BILLY looked after him a moment thinking it rather a pleasant fancy to call mother and daughter "the girls," but the situation quickly claimed his attention. It was still light, and May Nell might come to the garage and discover him; he would go to see the viaduct.

He went by the lower gate and skirted the river, a river in volume, though called Tum-wah Creek. As he walked he mentally constructed the scene as it would look when Mr. Smith's enterprises possessed the valley,—he heard the hum of mills and factories; on the peaceful lake below saw ships entering the canal from the Sound to load for ports, for the world's far ports.

He looked back at the beautiful mansion; it would be a pity to see it desecrated, made into a boarding-house, perhaps. Yet Mr. Smith would move his summer home farther on. It was the

way of this vast growing city,—to-day's lovely suburb was to-morrow's mart of business.

Billy had barely walked around the viaduct, marvelling at the swiftness and secrecy of its building, when a low whistle halted him, and the tramp-philosopher came from the woods.

"Hello, Billy! Back in time for the rumpus, are you?"

"What rumpus?"

"Hasn't the boss put you wise? It's coming sure."

"What's coming?"

"There'll be a row down there to-night when the old man starts to close that gap in the rails."

"Oh, I guess not." Billy turned away with more jauntiness than he felt.

"See here, boy!" Billy could see that the man was serious and sober. "I know—those hounds have it in for Mr. Smith."

"But surely he is prepared."

"For what will happen down there," he pointed to the valley, "but not here. The ladies—they came home."

"Mr. Smith didn't expect them. It can't be helped now."

"Not helped? Why doesn't he send them to town?"

Billy thought hard. Why didn't he, to be sure? There must be some reason,—perhaps it must not be known that Mr. Smith expected trouble,—but whatever his motive Billy must stand by him, stand by May Nell and her mother. "He had his reasons; it's not for you or me to question them."

"Perhaps not."

"Are you going down there?" Billy nodded toward the railroad.

"No. He needs help here. They'd like to see this viaduct go up in smoke, those Tum-wah rascals."

"Gee! Will they do that?" Billy thought a minute. "Say! If you should need me, blow this whistle twice; but don't do anything that will let the two at the house know I'm there. See?" Billy handed over his whistle.

"I'm on. If you hear shots don't be scared. I'm heeled." He showed a new revolver.

They separated, and Billy hurried back to his place. So far there was nothing unusual in the quiet evening scene. Through the foliage he

could see May Nell and her mother in their summer white, sitting on the veranda; could hear the soft murmur of their intermittent conversation, though no words. The evening was warm, and the fragrance of honeysuckle and mignonette heavy on the air. For years afterwards Billy never smelled them that he did not live over again the events of that awful night.

Many times he made the rounds, stealthily, keeping most of the time near the garage lest he should be called. When he went in once for something, the clock said eleven; and the next time he looked toward the veranda, they were gone. The lower house was dark, but upstairs lights twinkled from two of the rooms; shortly they, too, were dark.

Two men entered the radiance of the gateway lamps. Billy hastened down the drive to see if they went toward the viaduct; but they kept on up the road that led through the woods to some small ranches.

For more than an hour all was quiet. Billy hoped the two in the house were sleeping calmly; hoped no hint of this night's anxieties would ever come to them. Suddenly, unbidden, came

the thought of fire! He knew how the stairways ran, how he could reach those rooms unless both stairways were cut off. In that case—was there a ladder? He measured with his eye the more than twenty feet between those windows and the sloping ground.

He remembered seeing a ladder at the back of the garage, and went to look for it, but it was gone; and he wondered if it could have been placed in the basement for safe keeping while the servants were away.

As he returned to his beat again, a ringing of metal struck through the darkness. It was the hammers! They had begun to lay the rails! Regularly, beat on beat, came the blows. Dozens of lanterns were bunched each side of the track, shedding a dim light. Billy wondered why Mr. Smith had not strung electric lamps on a sliding wire. Perhaps he did not want the Green Hills Power Company to know,—since he must buy power of them until his own plant was completed.

Billy crept quickly back to his post near the garage, thinking Mr. Smith might call him. Again he saw the two men in the lamplight go-

ing by on the road, this time headed for Tumwah. An uneasy suspicion came to him: What business had taken those men to the isolated ranches and back so late at night?

A dozen answers,—business, illness, a telegram,—many legitimate errands might be theirs for this midnight trip. Yet Billy could not rid himself of his suspicion.

The sounds from below came regularly, but more rapidly, as if some force were hurrying the workers. He could see the bent backs, and occasionally the glint of metal in the lantern light; could see the helpers move the stacked lights on, and hear the ring of the rails as they were dropped on the ties.

The moon, red, lop-sided, and ragged, appeared over the Cascades. That meant it was past twelve o'clock. Billy was creeping carefully by the house to patrol the farther line of fence, when the hammering below suddenly ceased; some of the lanterns went out, and noises of another sort drifted up to him,—angry voices, the whack of sticks and clubs, and then a shot.

It had come,—the protest of blows! He could see the confused commingling of forms,

hear louder voices, and again the dull crash as of wooden weapons; and in a moment a detonation—a blast.

The road-bed—they must be blowing it up! Yet while Billy strained his eyes to catch the location of the blast, and the meaning of the turmoil that seemed a tragedy, he noticed a sudden stilling of the commotion, and the shifting of the forms. One by one the lanterns were lighted again, and soon the hammers rang, now more rapidly than before.

Billy understood. Mr. Smith had been prepared. He had seen that the law should be ready to aid him as soon as assistance was needed. The work would go right on, and Billy felt sure Mr. Smith would find a speedy way to repair whatever damage might have been done. This outrage so promptly met would surely stop any others that might have been contemplated.

Relieved, he ran into the garage and picked up the sandwich and bottle of milk that were to be his lunch, and went out again where eye and ear might still be on duty.

He did not eat. As he stepped out, a flame shot up at the side of the house. He rushed into

the garage to call up the fire department; but the moment he took down the receiver he knew the wires had been cut,—the telephone was “dead.”

A cold horror swept him. Whatever was done he must do himself. He ran to find the garden hose and soon had a stream of water playing. The force was good, and he could see that he made headway against the flame. Ought he to cry out? Wake the sleepers? If he did, they would see — hear — No one could tell what might happen down there in the valley before the coming of the sun. He was gaining — the fire would soon be out. He would let them sleep.

But this might not be the end. Those wires — where would the cut be? Near the grounds surely, for anywhere else they were in plain sight of all passers following the road.

He was looking for the last hidden sparks and considering it safe to leave when a shot from the direction of the viaduct proclaimed that malevolence that night was missing no property belonging to Mr. Smith. A second shot rang out, and a third; and presently two men emerged from the

forest running, the forward one stumbling and recovering only to fall again and rise no more. The second came toward the garage drive, and Billy knew him to be the tramp.

He ran to open to him, explaining breathlessly about the fire and the wires as they hurried up the walk.

"You take the hose and watch while I hunt where those wires are cut. I believe we shall need the fire engine."

"It won't do any good; you can't mend the cut if you find it. Better break into the house and bring out the women now."

"Wake them to all this turmoil, when it may not be necessary? No. I'll find and splice those wires someway."

"You'll get shocked, crippled, if not killed."

"Telephone wires don't shock to hurt."

Without more parley Billy hurried out of the enclosure and around to where the line entered the grounds, finding what he expected. The wire had been cut near the pole. It was easy to tie the long end to the fence, but he was puzzled how to manage the other.

The man—how had he reached the wire so

high? He must have had a ladder—that was where the ladder went! Or—could he have brought one? Climbers! Of course. Billy's heart sank, but rose again when he remembered that all poles at Tuk-wil-la were of iron.

While thinking, he was hunting, slowly he thought, yet actually flying from place to place, diving into the greenery along the fence and leaving more than one drop of blood as tribute to the barbs. He found the ladder at last, a flimsy thing, and placed it against the pole.

Wire! He must have wire. Like lightning his mind flashed from point to point of his difficulty. The clothes-line,—that was copper! He started back, running and thinking. How could he cut it? Must he take time to twist it in two, even supposing he could? It was such heavy wire. Tools in the garage? Yes, perhaps, and the chest locked; and while he hunted, precious moments would be going.

The lawn-mower! Perhaps that would do the trick. He knew right where it was, and ran for it. Now he was at the line, pulling the end loose from its staple, and wishing all the time the moon would get a move on and shine up

brighter. Length by length he tore the wire from the arms of the clothes tree, each staple "in harder than the last," it seemed. He thought he had never been so weak, so slow.

At last he had enough, and made a bight in it. Would the lawn-mower "play up"? Yes! It cut the line in two, and Billy ran up the ladder, soon making the connection. He got several light shocks and for a panic-stricken moment trembled lest he could not let go, and should be marooned in the air. Yet he came safely through his task, and ran with his ladder to the garage to try the wire.

Before he arrived he heard the bell ringing. The 'phone was alive!

He went in and took the message. It was to say that Mr. Smith had gone to town and would be back in an hour. Billy knew this was from the Tum-wah office; and he told them there what had happened. He wondered if he should call the fire department on the chance of what might occur, but decided against it.

Fatal mistake. He started toward the house to tell the other what he had done, beginning to speak at some distance, when a boom shattered

the very air around them, lifting and enveloping them. It came from beneath, almost at their feet it seemed, and both men staggered back half blinded.

For an instant neither could understand what had happened. But for an instant only — less than a breath. The whole interior of the house flashed into light. Each window was a red and angry eye.

“The fire department — South 687 — call them up!” Billy commanded, grasping at the hand of the man and running with him,—he was going for the ladder.

But the other pulled away. “The fire department can’t manage this! We must get the women out! Come, quick! They’ll be burned!”

“Do as I tell you!” thundered Billy, breaking loose. “I’ll get the ladder. Come to me as soon as you ’phone.”

While he was shouting he had found the ladder and was hurrying back. Both knew that a mine had been laid into the house, into the basement. The fire outside had been but a “flash in the pan.” They knew the house must go; and

such a large fire at that season would endanger the forest, and many homes near. Tuk-wil-la was just within the city limits, and entitled to the services of the department; they must stop the fire there.

It was but a few seconds from the time of the explosion before Billy was placing his ladder at one of the windows where the lights had twinkled so shortly before, calling May Nell's name in tones that rang through the night.

He knew that both stairways were cut off; whoever had prepared the mine had seen to that. "May Nell! Come to the east window!" Billy called again and again as he climbed nimbly, and plunged into the smoke and heat.

"Yes, I'm here — in mama's room — she's fallen — I can't lift her."

Billy heard the suffocation in her voice, the weakness. He knew the room, and groped his way on, calling, "Come this way! The ladder is at the other window! Come quick! I'll bring your mother!"

Billy's own words were choking, sputtering even though he was holding his head down. Where was he? Surely he had made no mistake,

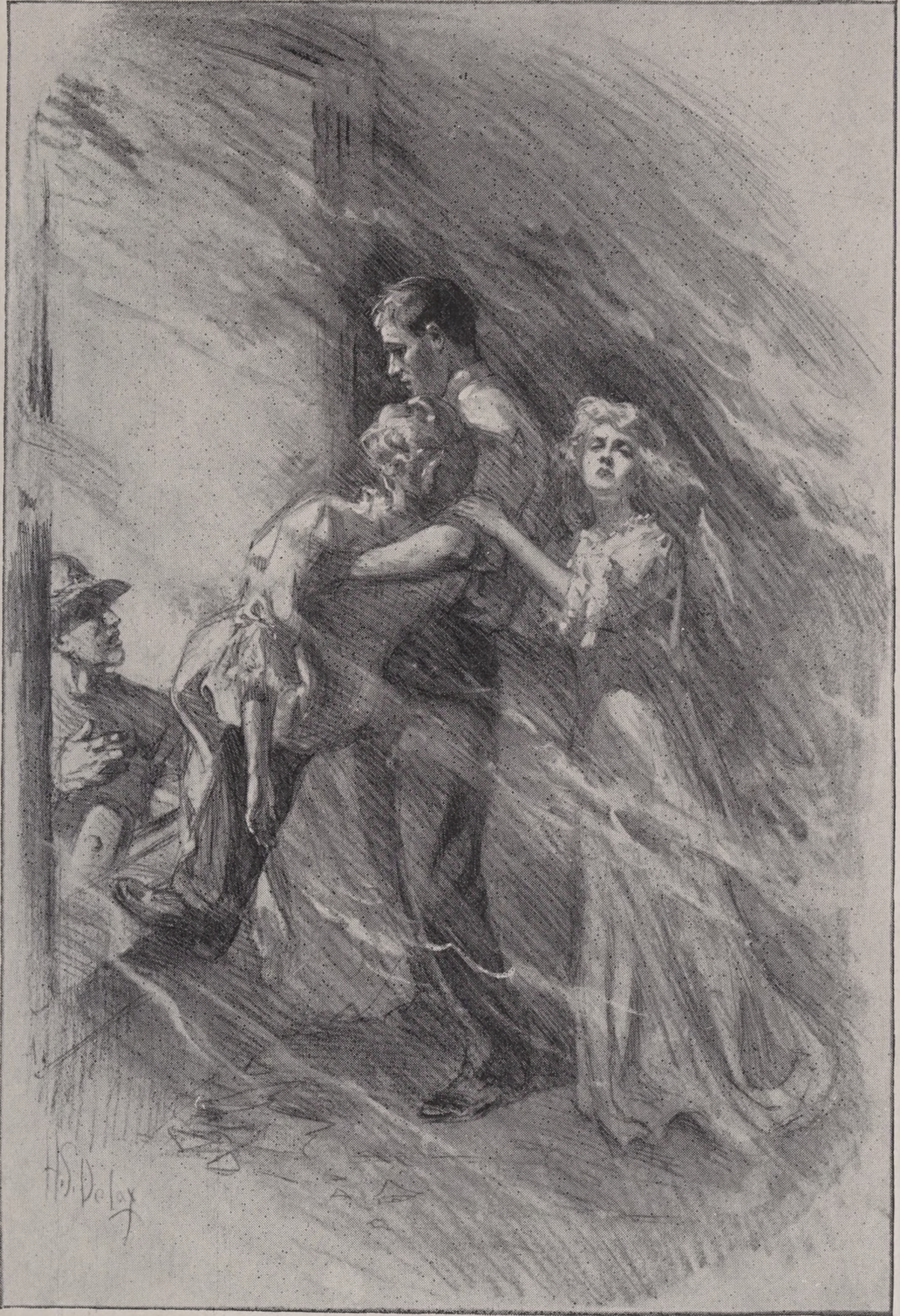
was going the right way. "May Nell! Where's the door? Where are you?" But no voice answered, and for a breath Billy believed he could not go on. They were caught, lost!

Yet that thought nerved him. Those two suffocating—burning— The little girl he had succored once before, the brightest, loveliest— Yes, in that instant his soul flashed a clear vision! She was the one. She had been the inspiration to the noblest deeds he had ever thought or hoped. She was the star of his life!

Some instinct guided him,—or was it his own soul? Something besides conscious volition led him through an open door, kept him calling, calling frantically, and crouching around the room to find the prostrate woman. "May Nell! May Nell! Speak! Where are you?"

It was enough. Some shock from his soul to hers galvanized her to consciousness. She roused, answered feebly, and moved toward the bed where her mother had fallen.

Billy lifted the insensible woman, turned swiftly back, and called encouragingly to May Nell. "Hold fast to me, girlie!" And when



“Give her to me; I am fresh,” he said, attempting to take Mrs. Smith from Billy’s arms

he felt her grasp relax from his arm, "Brace up! Be game, Nell! We're getting there!"

Then he lost sense of time, of rational movement. Even the dead weight of his burden did not signify. He felt no emotion. He seemed only to be plodding on stolidly, while behind him flames roared and floors crashed. He felt the timbers sag suddenly, knew the fire was close upon them, yet he could not hurry.

But while smoke and heavy burden and heat dulled his mind, he was actually making incredible haste. He felt the clearer air before he saw the open window, and arrived there to find the tramp waiting, the only one who had dared to enter the furnace. He had broken out the window for them, sash and glass.

"Give her to me; I am fresh," he said, attempting to take Mrs. Smith from Billy's arms.

He was a small, slender man, and Billy dared not trust him. "Not her; here!" He pushed May Nell forward.

But the little girl shrank back. "No, no! Mama first."

"Go!" Billy commanded, and thrust her into the awaiting arms. His brain was clear

enough now. The lighter pair must go first; the ladder would certainly bear them, if not the heavier two. Well, he must see that his own charge was somehow safely landed.

They obeyed. People did obey Billy when he used that tone. Those who had gathered from the nearest houses steadied the ladder while the first two came down, and held out glad hands to receive them.

But to Billy the rescuer below him seemed to creep. Would he never reach the ground? The floor trembled with a new shock. Billy heard the crash of another wall, saw the fire leap through the gap behind him, and daring the lesser danger he climbed out on the ladder. Even as he passed to the first rung a sheet of flame burst upon them shrouding them, reaching for them like some red, cosmic tongue that would lap them into the mouth of destruction.

But they emerged. Billy felt the spring of the wood that announced its release from the weight of the other two, and hurried on with his precious freight, knowing the danger, yet hoping the ladder would hold. Midway between fire and earth he heard a crack, a splintering, and felt the sag.

“Catch her!” he shouted hoarsely, and reached her down.

His cry fixed attention on the descending woman, and she was safely caught and carefully borne to coolness and friends. But for Billy they were too late. Relieved of responsibility for others, he made no attempt to direct his fall—perhaps he could not have done so—but landed heavily in an inert heap.

They lifted him tenderly. Almost at once he regained consciousness, and asked anxiously of May Nell and her mother. It was not till he was assured by his own eyes that both were safe, and that Mrs. Smith’s hurt was from a light fall that temporarily had stunned but had not harmed her, that he realized the meaning of the limp arm at his side.

CHAPTER XVII

BILLY WINS

THE beautiful house and its contents vanished before their eyes. The fire department arrived only in time to prevent the fire from spreading. Yet Mr. Smith said that the timber that would otherwise have gone was worth twenty times the value of the house, save for its sentiment. And even that was not what it would have been for an older home; the family treasures were at the town house.

It was enough, the magnate said, to receive into his arms when he raced out from town, his loved ones safe, and except for shaken nerves, unhurt.

It was not possible in the long trial that followed to find the "man at the top." The poor ignorant foreigners who had been inflamed against Mr. Smith, and, while he slept, had entered his house and laid the train to its destruction, paid the penalty; while the one who tried to blow up the viaduct died

from the tramp's bullet. Billy's evidence decided the coroner's jury, for none of them ever saw the tramp after that night.

The Tum-wah people could not be directly identified with the outrages, but investigation proved enough to cause the revocation of their franchise, and incidentally Alvin Short finished his career in stripes.

Billy was taken to the hospital where his injuries — except the broken arm — were soon healed. Here Mr. Smith came and more than once poured out his gratitude.

"This ends it, Billy. We'll have no more nonsense about working till you've taken aboard your tools, your equipment of education and travel. It's school now; you begin with the term. Hear?"

Billy smiled his thanks. Later, when he was on his feet, would be time enough to explain that his life must be lived according to his own idea of duty.

A few days after the fire Mrs. Bennett was surprised to receive an urgent call at the telephone in an unknown voice begging for an im-

mediate interview; and a little later an excited young woman was at her door.

"I'm Erminie Fisher," she explained. "I've come about Billy. How is he?"

"He's doing well; will soon be out of the hospital."

"And he won't be crippled, scarred?"

"No. In a few weeks he will be quite recovered." Mrs. Bennett could not throw cordiality into her tone. Loyal as Billy had been to Erminie his mother divined far more than he suspected of the part this girl had played in his life.

"Oh, Mrs. Bennett, he's the best boy in the world. He's done so much for me. I saw in the paper what a hero he was at the fire, and I came right home. I—I—was so afraid I couldn't clear up everything, but now that I've seen Mumps—Sydney Bremmer—and heard a lot from him, I think I can."

"Sit here, where it is cooler," Mrs. Bennett invited, pushing a chair to the open window. "Now tell me what you wish,—only that don't distress yourself."

The kinder words and tone cheered Erminie.

She told the story of her acquaintance with Billy, of the picnic, of the attitude of the school bully, of the letter, the money, and of her growing conviction that the letter was a forgery, and the taking of the money a theft.

“And I came back to tell you, Mr. Wright, Professor Teal,—anybody who can help tell the truth for Billy. I’ve been a fool, I know it now; but Billy sha’ n’t suffer another day for that.”

Mrs. Bennett took Erminie’s hands in her own. “You are a brave girl. It has not been easy for you to do this, nor has it been easy for me to look on helpless, and see Billy’s life so early burdened.”

“He could have put himself right any day if he had told on me.”

“How is it you dared come home, since your father was so—so angry—” Mrs. Bennett hesitated.

“I would have dared anything. I had made up my mind to set Billy right, no matter what happened to me. But my Uncle Henry fixed it. Anyway, after what Mr. Short did to dad, he was glad I did n’t marry the man, and dad’s as pleased as ma to have me home again.”

"You—wish Mr. Wright to know—what you've told me?"

"Yes, yes! I want Billy to be cleared of everything, to go back to Fifth Avenue High respected as he deserves to be."

"Yet if—if you do this it will be hard for you. It's past, and a pity for you to be exposed to censure when you were only the victim of circumstances."

"Mrs. Bennett, Billy never hesitated to bear censure for me; now it's my turn. Besides—" She stopped and for the first time showed embarrassment. "I want you to know this,—Billy taught me some of the best things I know; and I loved him—I love him still. But now I know that it is not the kind of love a girl—a girl should have for the man she marries. I—I'm not going back on Billy, Mrs. Bennett. It's—it's—"

Mrs. Bennett reached over and gently stroked her hair. "You need not hesitate. I quite comprehend."

Erminie caught her hand. "It's perfectly lovely of you to say that. I've been feeling so mean—untrue to Billy—even while I've been

loving him all the time. But I've met a—a man, a good man, much older than Billy, and—and—”

“Yes, a man. Billy's only a boy, but you are a woman.”

“It was Billy who set me to thinking. He told me many things you have said, and I began to see that even if I had loved Billy as—in the right way, it would have been wrong for us to marry.”

“That is over now. Look to the future, and—I hope you will be very happy.”

“And may I bring Will—Mr. Harrington, to see you? He's anxious to meet you, and Billy—all the family. And I want him to before—before I change my name.”

Mrs. Bennett made the girl happy by her sympathy. Erminie summoned Sydney by telephone to meet them at Mr. Wright's office, and there the two told their story. Mr. Wright sent a command to Jim Barney that brought him while they waited. He soon found his small knowledge of law and trickery no match for the astute lawyer, and he was very glad to accept immunity from prosecution on more than one

charge by a full confession of his misdeeds, and the payment to Billy of the money he had induced Erminie to take.

When the interview was over Erminie and her lover went to the hospital, where she saw Billy first alone.

Never had she seemed so dear and sweet to him as when she stood beside him telling the story of what she had done for him. And when, after a moment's absence she brought her Cousin Will, looking so happy, and proud of him, Billy felt his heart bound with a great joy, the joy of freedom.

"Here's the dearest man in the world, Billy, and the best, next to you." She looked sidewise at the well-made but rather short man beside her, with a trace of her old coquetry lurking in voice and manner.

Billy shook the firm hand with his left one. "She has it twisted, Mr. Harrington. You're the best man; I'm—I'm just a kid."

"I wonder she ever looked at a man, then," the other returned generously, waving his hands apart in recognition of the six feet of muscle and vigor that surmounted even the background of a hospital cot.

Two weeks later the great day came; the day when the City of Green Hills paid court to her young citizens; when the Scouts marched by the reviewing stand, twelve hundred strong, and later performed their feats of skill in the competition for honors; when the Young Citizens' Clubs, boys and girls, each club led by its own band, in song and speech celebrated some great event in the history of their city, or prophesied her future greatness.

Mr. Streeter told the multitude that this was but the beginning of a campaign for the promotion of civic pride, a pride that should foster art and beauty and civic honor, to the end that the City of Green Hills should be known throughout the land as the best as well as the most beautiful city in the world.

"These things will make it the greatest. Do you think when it is known that this is the cleanest, the most beautiful, and the best governed city in America, that any power can withhold people from coming here? The American city that makes commercialism second to these three things will in ten years outgrow all others. Humanity hungers for such civic ideals and does n't know it."

Then came the explanation of the flag competition and the announcement of the winner. Billy thought the highest possible note of joy had been sounded,—for his design had won.

There above them all, at the moment of Mr. Streeter's announcement, the banner was run up the tall pole and beneath the Stars and Stripes flung out to the breeze, the official flag of the City of Green Hills.

Cheers upon cheers! And Billy was called. When he stepped to the platform, his arm still in the sling, but otherwise rosy with health and joy, the audience rose, and cheers from the men, and fluttering handkerchiefs from the women, made Billy wonder if this was just plain earth or some other more glorious planet.

After an almost imperceptible silence came the yell of his school, given with a gusto that told him he had been reinstated in their favor.

He made his bow and a modest speech. In the crowd near the platform were May Nell and Erminie. And as he finished, it was into May Nell's eyes he looked, and knew who held his heart.

The exercises were over, the crowd began to

move. He went down and took her hand. And at that moment came again a ringing cry, "What's the matter with Billy To-morrow? Billy To-morrow's Billy To-day! He's all right! Rah, rah, rah, Billy!"

THE END

SOME OPINIONS OF MRS. CARR'S
FIRST SUCCESS

BILLY TO-MORROW

"It is a powerful story, the scene of which is laid in California after the great earthquake. It is admirably told, and makes a strong appeal to all that is best in a young person's nature."—*Philadelphia Public Ledger*.

"A splendid story of a boy's love and courage."—*Hartford Courant*.

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"Sarah Pratt Carr has invented a lovable young hero in her bright story, 'Billy To-Morrow.' So full of incident is the story that it will hold the interest of boy and girl readers from the first chapter to the last."—*Des Moines Capital*.

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PRESS OPINIONS REGARDING MRS. CARR'S

Billy To-Morrow in Camp

"Here are a crowd of real boys in a delightful vacation camp. The interest is sustained from the beginning to the end. The publishers have done their part to make the book attractive, paper, type, binding and illustrations are all of the best, and the picture of Billy on the cover almost equals our ideal of him. Mrs. Carr is to be congratulated on having given to American young people one of the best books which has been written for them since the death of Miss Alcott and one which places her in the very front rank of writers of juvenile fiction."

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"It gives in an interesting style the adventures of a boy with a big heart and unusual courage. The fascinations of camp life are well portrayed. A good wholesome story for boys."

—*The United Presbyterian*

"A boy's book, full of all the exciting incidents that belong to a camping-out life by a group of bright lads who are bent on enjoyment of the freedom of the woods. There are many things which would naturally happen to a bright young lad in camp and which many bright young lads not in camp will delight to read." — *Journal of Education*.

"A lively and vivacious story which will gladden any sort of boy."

—*The Post Intelligencer (Seattle)*.

"Here is a new hero in boy literature, though not entirely new, as this is his second appearance between book covers. The popularity and success of the earlier book, 'Billy To-morrow,' and its adoption as the title of a series indicates that this manly, full-blooded, lovable young character is to be with us some time. The story has much life, action, and withal, good sense, and it carries the best sort of moral along with an enjoyable story without the reader the least expecting it. 'Billy' has a promising career ahead of him."

—*The Normal Instructor*.

"The story is a jolly one of outdoor camping experiences, with the boy's practical devices for comfort which young readers may find helpful for similar occasions." — *The Continent*.

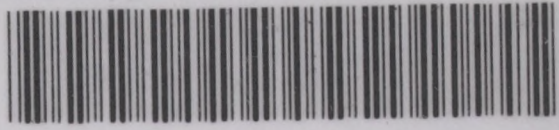
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